

Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory

EVALUATION REPORT

IDAHO CHARTER SCHOOLS

Program Report Year Five (2003-2004)

Prepared by
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Elke Geiger
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September 15, 2004

**Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory
101 S.W. Main Street, Suite 500
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	ii
LIST OF TABLES	ii
FACTS OF IDAHO CHARTER SCHOOLS	iii
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	iv
INTRODUCTION	1
Charter Schools in Idaho	1
METHODOLOGY	4
Guiding Questions and Philosophy of the Evaluation.....	4
Characteristics of Idaho Charter Schools	5
Enrollment	6
Student Characteristics	6
EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM	9
Student Services	10
Facility	11
Calendar and Scheduling	12
School-Family-Community Partnerships	17
CHARTER SCHOOL SURVEYS.....	20
SITE VISIT	39
Meridian Medical Arts Charter High School	39
North Star Public Charter School	43
White Pine Charter School	47
CONCLUSIONS.....	50
Accountability	50
Student Performance.....	50
Uniqueness.....	50

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Location of Charter Schools Within Idaho.....	2
Figure 2. Charter Schools' Level of Accomplishment on Student Performance Goals (Self-Reported).....	13
Figure 3. Charter Schools' Level of Accomplishment on Organizational Goals (Self-Reported).....	13
Figure 4. Average Representation on Charter School Boards	15
Figure 5. Annual Operating Budgets and Enrollment	16
Figure 6. Types and Sources of Funding Received by Schools.....	17
Figure 7. Parent Involvement in Schools.....	18
Figure 8. Reasons for Working at the Charter School	23
Figure 9. Staff Satisfaction with Aspects of Their Job and School Environment.....	24
Figure 10. Staff Accountability	25
Figure 11. Teacher Autonomy.....	25
Figure 12. Staff Outlook on Global School Issues	26
Figure 13. Parent/Community Support.....	26
Figure 14. Student Needs	27
Figure 15. Technical Assistance Needs	28
Figure 16. Reasons for Attending Charter School.....	30
Figure 17. Agreement with Statements about Students' Experiences	31
Figure 18. Agreement with Statements about the School.....	32
Figure 19. Reasons for Sending Child to Charter School.....	34
Figure 20. Satisfaction with Aspects of the Charter School	36
Figure 21. Rating the Performance of the Charter School.....	37

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Starting Years, Grade Levels, and 2003-04 Student Enrollment of Idaho Operating Charter Schools	3
Table 2. Enrollment, Students Leaving Mid-year and Number of Students on Waiting Lists	6
Table 3. Student Ethnicity by Charter Schools and Their Sponsoring Districts and Student Ethnicity in Idaho	7
Table 4. Student Characteristics of Special Categories by Charter Schools (in Percent of Total School Enrollment)	8
Table 5. Educational Programs Used.....	9
Table 6. Assessment Tools Used in Idaho Charter School.....	10
Table 7. Student Services Provided by Charter Schools	11
Table 8. Average Facility Square Footage per Student	12
Table 9. Number of Schools That Adopted Policies from Their Sponsoring District	15
Table 10. Annual Budgets of Charter Schools vs. Enrollment.....	16
Table 11. Number of Survey Administered and Return Rate From Each of Charter Schools.....	20
Table 12. Percent of Respondents by School	21
Table 13. Professional Development Opportunities Available in the Last Year	27
Table 14. Respondents by Grade Level.....	29
Table 15. Parent Survey: Respondents by School.....	33

FACTS OF IDAHO CHARTER SCHOOLS

Charter school law passed in Idaho: 1998.

Number of charter schools: 8 in 1999-2000; 9 in 2000-01; 11 in 2001-02; 14 in 2002-03; and 16 in 2003-04.

Number of charter school students: 1,000 in 1999-2000; 1,067 in 2000-01; 1,476 in 2001-02; 3,100 in 2002-03; and 4,790 in 2003-04, which is about 2 percent of Idaho public school students (252,037).

Largest Idaho charter school: Idaho Virtual Academy (1,687 students in 2003-04).

Smallest Idaho charter school: Blackfoot Community Charter School (60 students in 2003-04).

Most popular education programs offered in Idaho charter schools: Character Education (85 percent) and Hands-on Experiences (77 percent).

Average student-to-teacher ratio in non-virtual charter schools: 19-to-1; district average is 17-to-1.

Percentage of charter school board members who are parents with children in charter schools in 2003-04: 49%.

Most important reasons for working at charter schools as reported by teachers: high emphasis on academics and on educational programs.

Most frequently cited reason for attending charter schools by students: parents' preference.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past five years, the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory has collected a significant amount of data from Idaho charter schools through self-reporting profiles, surveys, and site visits as part of a contract with Idaho Department of Education. Analysis of the data provides a clear picture of the status of Idaho charter schools and their successes and challenges.

Focus Areas

The evaluation focused on three areas: **accountability** (Did the charter schools accomplish what they proposed in their charter mission statements and goals?), **student performance** (Did students meet the achievement levels proposed in their charter school petitions?), and **uniqueness** (What makes a charter school in Idaho unique?).

Accountability

The number of charter schools in Idaho increased from eight in 1999-2000 to 16 in 2003-2004; during this time student enrollment increased from 935 to 4,796. Nineteen charter petitions had been approved by 2003-2004, however, one never opened and two were revoked. According to data reported by the 16 operating charter schools in 2003-04, 89 percent of organizational goals set by the charters in their petitions were met (50 percent) or exceeded (39 percent); 9 percent of these goals were partially met; and only 2 percent were not yet addressed.

Student Performance

The 2003-2004 data (self-reported by the schools) show that 83 percent of student performance goals were met (68 percent) or exceeded (15 percent), and 17 percent of the goals were partially met. All charter schools used multiple tools to assess student academic performance in compliance with state assessment requirements.

Uniqueness

Idaho is one of several states that allow virtual learning as an option for delivery of instruction. In 2003-04, approximately 43 percent of Idaho's 4,796 charter school students were served by two virtual schools (Idaho Virtual Academy and Idaho Virtual High School) online. Character education and hands-on experiences are part of the curriculum for most charter schools in this study.

Idaho's charter schools enjoy strong support from the local communities they serve. Parental involvement is common and, in fact, is expected as part of their charter schools' operation, with some parents actually doing voluntary teaching. Teachers in charter schools have a high level of commitment and frequently mention joining charter school faculties because of the ability to explore new educational ideas. Students were positive

about their experience in charter schools citing individual attention from their teachers and timely feedback on their academic performance.

Challenges

As Idaho charter schools are on their way to maturity, they face a series of challenges:

- About 50 percent of charter schools in Idaho are operating in temporary facilities. It is still an uphill struggle for these schools to find permanent facilities. Some temporary facilities are crowded and limiting to student learning activities.
- Some charter schools still have difficulty defining who they are and how they are different from their district schools. There is still lack of understanding in the community that charter schools are public schools.
- Even though charter schools were designed to be autonomous in many respects, the relationship with or the support they could get from their sponsoring school districts could be crucial on a number of fronts, such as facility, lunch program, transportation, and purchasing. More discussions are needed at various levels regarding district roles in supporting charter schools and the ways in which charter schools could involve their district effectively in operating their schools.
- A strong need exists for technical assistance for these charter schools in their leadership and governance in handling such issues as budgeting, personnel policies, and community relationships.
- Founding parents have been instrumental in setting up their charter schools. These schools have thrived on their enthusiasm and dedication. As children of these founding parents leave charter schools, it will be a challenge to sustain that level of enthusiasm and dedication, particularly when the success of the school is dependent upon them.

INTRODUCTION

This document is the report of an evaluation of the Idaho charter schools program conducted by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL), under contract with the Idaho Department of Education. It is the final annual report in a five-year study of the program. This report contains comprehensive school profiles; case studies of the three newest schools; and surveys administered to teachers, students, and parents of each charter school. The report also compares data among schools, discusses technical assistance needs, notes trends over time, and makes conclusions about the charter school program.

Charter Schools in Idaho

Idaho passed a charter school law in 1998, becoming the 31st state with such a law in the country. The growth in the number of charter schools has been slow but steady since then. Between July 1998 and the 2003-2004 school year, 19 charter petitions had been granted by local school boards. Of these, one developer never opened the school and two charters were revoked by the authorizing school districts.

This report includes the 16 that were operating the during 2003-2004 school year. Most are very close to large population centers (see Figure 1). Idaho's 16 charter schools currently serve 4,796 students, a more than 50 percent increase from last year's total student enrollment of 3,100. Nationally, approximately 2,996¹ charter schools are in operation. Table 1 summarizes starting year, grade level, and students enrolled in 2003-04.

¹ *Annual Survey of America's Charter Schools 2003–2004*, Center for Education Reform (CER).

Figure 1. Location of Charter Schools Within Idaho

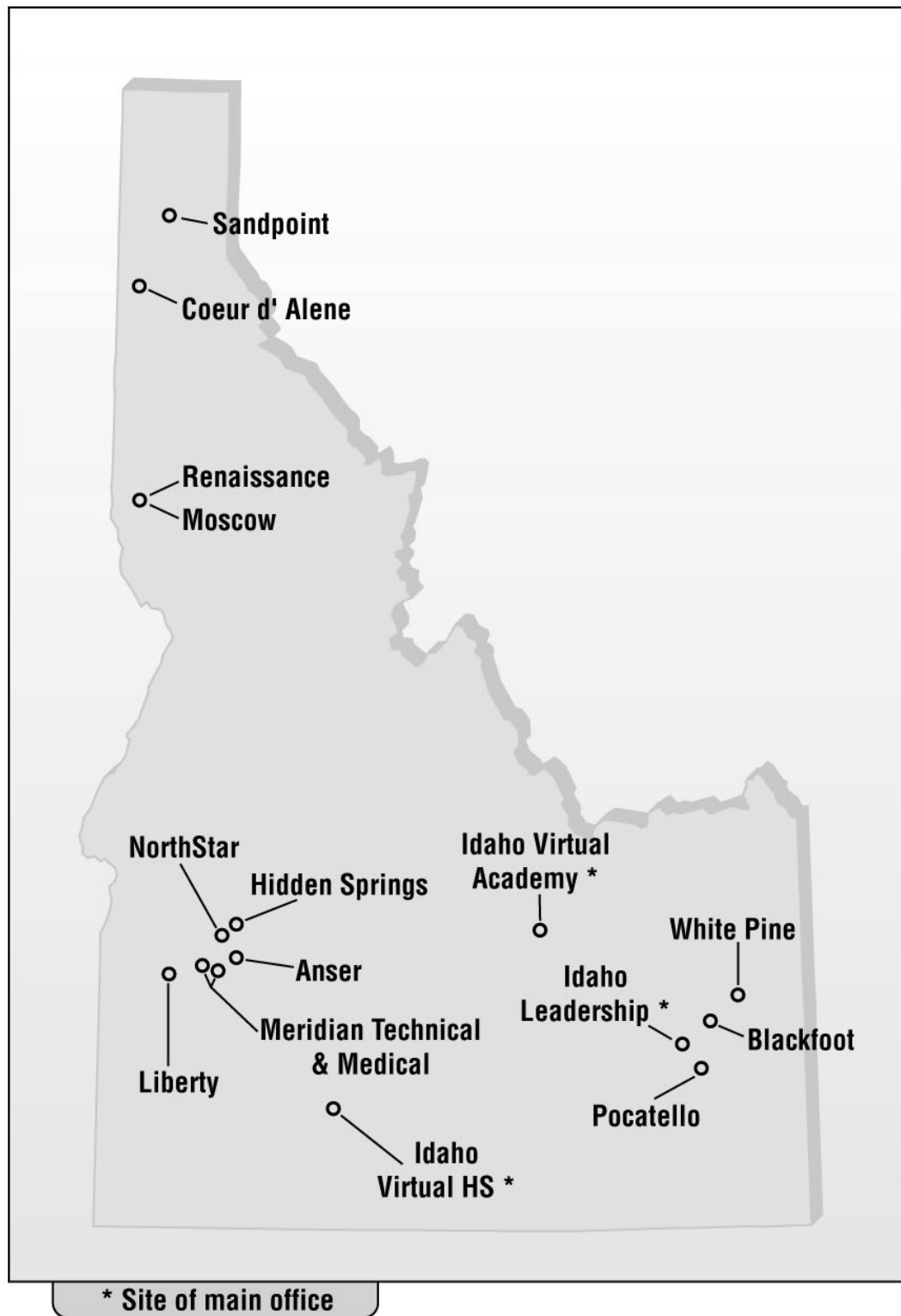


Table 1. Starting Years, Grade Levels, and 2003-04 Student Enrollment of Idaho Operating Charter Schools

	Name	Starting Year	Grade Level	Students Enrolled
1.	Anser Charter School, Boise	1999	K-6	144
2.	Blackfoot Community Charter School, Blackfoot	2000	K-5	60
3.	Coeur d'Alene Charter Academy, Coeur d'Alene	1999	6-12	383
4.	Hidden Springs Charter Schools, Boise	2001	K-9	372
5.	Idaho Leadership Academy, Pingree (serving students in 12 districts in eastern Idaho)	2002	9-12	120
6.	Idaho Virtual Academy, headquartered at Arco (serving students statewide)	2002	K-12	1,687
7.	Idaho Virtual High School headquartered at Mountain Home (serving students statewide)	2002	9-12	378
8.	Liberty Charter School (formerly known as Nampa Charter School, Nampa)	1999	K-12	347
9.	Meridian Charter School, Meridian	1999	9-12	200
10.	Meridian Medical Arts Charter School, Meridian	2003	9-10	135
11.	Moscow Charter School, Moscow	1998	K-6	110
12.	North Star Charter School, Eagle	2003	K-8	263
13.	Pocatello Community Charter School, Pocatello	1999	K-8	182
14.	Renaissance Charter School, Moscow	1999	K-12	94
15.	Sandpoint Charter School, Sandpoint	2001	7-9	126
16.	White Pine Charter School, Idaho Falls	2003	K-6	195

METHODOLOGY

Guiding Questions and Philosophy of the Evaluation

Sixteen charter schools in Idaho offer unique learning opportunities and expanded educational choices to 4,796 students. They also offer opportunities for educators to play new roles and test new forms of school governance. The ultimate success of charter schools in Idaho is, and will be, reflected in their ability to make progress toward the educational mission and goals by which they have agreed to be held accountable, as well as their impact on public education reform. Data collection and reporting is a critical step in the successful demonstration of the accountability and impact of charter schools in Idaho.

NWREL used three questions² to guide the collection, analysis, and reporting of data:

1. Did the charter schools accomplish what they proposed, based on their mission and goals?
2. Did their students meet the achievement levels proposed in their charter school applications?
3. What makes charter schools in Idaho unique?

The evaluation process is guided by the notion that it should be done *with* rather than *to* the stakeholders of a charter school. It must meet the needs of the various stakeholders of each charter school, as well as those of the Idaho Department of Education. For this reason, administrators, teachers, parents, and students from each school have been included in the process, and the staff members of the Idaho Department of Education were involved in reviewing draft instruments throughout its course.

The process includes three principal data sources: individual school profiles, surveys, and site visits. In Year One of this study, profiles were created for each of the original eight charter schools based on a review of existing data (charter applications, grant applications, annual reports) and input from schools. During subsequent years, each school was asked to update—or in the case of the newest schools, complete—its profile. The completed school profiles are in appendix of this report.

Next, instruments were designed to complement the existing data. Three separate surveys (staff survey, parents survey, and student survey) were developed to address the evaluation questions, one for each group of major stakeholders: parents, students (fourth-

² These questions came from the Massachusetts and Colorado State Charter School Program evaluation reports.

graders and above), and staff (teachers, administrators, and any other staff coming into frequent contact with students).

All three surveys assessed satisfaction with the school and reasons for either attending, having child(ren) attend, or working at the school. All three surveys also listed a variety of statements about the schools with which respondents rated their level of agreement. The parent and the teacher/administrator surveys measured the perceived success of the schools in addressing their mission and goals, and the teacher/administrator survey also assessed technical assistance needs. The surveys have remained very consistent from year to year, with only minor modifications made to address issues that surfaced during the course of the project.

In mid-March, parent surveys were sent to each non-virtual school for distribution along with instructions and self-addressed stamped envelopes so that they could be returned confidentially. Internet versions of the parent survey were also available for those with access (specifically, those parents of virtual school students); virtual schools received instructions and letters to e-mail to parents about the survey location online. Student and staff surveys were posted on the Internet; passwords were required for entry to the surveys. A 100 percent participation rate was requested from all three groups. Return rates and responses are discussed in the survey section of this report. Survey cover letters stated that surveys must be completed (and returned if sent by mail) by April 15, 2004. Surveys not received by April 23, 2004, are not included in the analysis.

Site visits were conducted at Meridian Medical Arts Charter School, North Star Charter School, and White Pine Charter School. The other 13 schools had been visited in the last three years (site visit results of all other schools are included in previous years' reports). The visits are included to add depth to the picture of the charter schools in Idaho, and to provide a better understanding of the process occurring at the school, the attainment of proposed goals, and positive outcomes as well as specific challenges experienced by the school. The site visits reflected each school's unique program and environment.

Characteristics of Idaho Charter Schools

The individual school profiles include data separated into five categories: General Descriptions of the school and its students, Educational Program and Assessment, Performance Goals, Governance, and Financial Data and Other Outcomes. General characteristics of the schools, based on the profile data, are summarized below. Data for each school is in the appendix. Most of the schools provided complete and updated profiles. Unfortunately, it is difficult to compare Idaho charters to charters on a national level because of a lack of consistent national data.

Enrollment

Charter school student enrollment in Idaho has increased from 935 in 1999-2000 to 4,796 in 2003-04, a five-fold increase over the past five years. The students enrolled in the 16 currently operational charter schools are approximately 2 percent of Idaho's public school students³. The schools report that the number of students on waiting lists is about 81 percent of the total number already enrolled. It should be noted that charter schools differ from other public schools in that they can set caps on enrollment. About 6 percent of students left their charter school in the middle of the school year for various reasons. The percent of children of organizers dropped from 8 percent in 1999-2000 to 2.6 percent in 03-04. Table 2 displays these figures by school.

Table 2. Enrollment, Students Leaving Mid-year and Number of Students on Waiting Lists

School	Enrollment	Students Leaving	Number on Waiting List
Anser	144	2	405
Blackfoot	60	3	60
Coeur d'Alene	383	85	71
Hidden Springs	372	14	495
Idaho Leadership Academy	120	43	57
Idaho Virtual Academy	1,687	39	327
Idaho Virtual High School	378	190	0
Liberty	347	6	1500
Meridian (Technical)	200	13	60
Meridian Medical	135	20	27
Moscow	110	4	10
North Star	263	0	400
Pocatello	182	12	250
Renaissance	94	Not Available	Not Available
Sandpoint	126	9	0
White Pine	195	Not Available	Not Available
Total	4,796	440	3,662

Student Characteristics

Charter schools in Idaho generally have a smaller proportion of minority students in comparison with their sponsoring districts. Some charter schools are more obvious in this regard than others. For example, Blackfoot has 10 percent of minority students while its

³ Total state enrollment in Idaho's public schools in 2003–2004 was 252,037.

sponsoring school district has about 33 percent. A similar pattern can be found with Idaho Leadership Academy and other schools as shown in Table 3. However, other charter schools have a significant amount of minority students versus their district's population when viewed in the context of Idaho's overall population.

Table 4 shows that charter schools also include special categories of students such as students with free or reduced lunch, special education, gifted and talented, and limited English proficient (LEP), and Title I students.

Table 3. Student Ethnicity by Charter Schools and Their Sponsoring Districts and Student Ethnicity in Idaho

Schools and Their Sponsoring Districts	Percent of Ethnicity					Multi-Racial (M)/Decline to state (D)
	White	Black	Hispanic	Native American	Asian/Pacific Islander	
Blackfoot Charter	90.00	0.00	5.00	2.00	3.00	
Blackfoot District	66.29	0.39	18.23	13.57	1.52	
Anser Charter	93.60	0.00	1.50	1.50	3.40	
Hidden Springs Charter	91.06	0.54	1.62	1.08	0.54	
North Star Charter	95.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	4.00	
Boise Independent District	87.37	1.95	7.00	0.62	3.06	
Coeur d'Alene Charter	96.00	0.50	0.80	0.20	0.80	
Coeur d'Alene District	95.29	0.61	2.36	0.64	1.10	
White Pine Charter	Not Available					
Idaho Falls District		0.97	12.09	0.92	1.54	
Meridian (Technical) Charter	97.00	2.00	0.00	0.00	1.00	
Meridian Medical Charter	93.50	0.50	2.60	0.00	3.40	
Meridian Joint District	91.96	1.38	3.38	0.81	2.47	
Moscow Charter	95.00	0.01	0.03	0.00	0.01	
Renaissance Charter	Not Available					
Moscow District	90.66	2.00	2.40	1.06	3.88	
Liberty Charter	90.00	0.00	7.00	1.00	2.00	
Nampa District	72.73	0.72	24.80	0.48	1.27	
Pocatello Charter	94.00	0.00	2.00	0.00	0.00	4.00 (M)
Pocatello District	85.07	1.30	6.55	5.35	1.73	
Sandpoint Charter	98.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	1.00	
Pend Oreille District	96.17	0.52	1.45	.73	1.13	
Idaho Leadership Academy	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	
Snake River District	80.32	0.34	17.63	1.27	0.44	
Idaho Virtual Academy	83.00	0.40	1.40	0.80	0.70	3.50 (M); 10.02 (D)
Butte County District	93.00	1.00	4.00	0.00	1.00	
Idaho Virtual High School	88.00	1.00	7.00	0.00	2.00	2.00 (M)
Mountain Home District	80.00	4.00	12.00	0.00	3.00	
STATE OF IDAHO	85.89	0.80	10.85	1.22	1.24	

SOURCE: Charter schools reported their own students' demographic information. District data were received from the Idaho Department of Education's statistics pages.

**Table 4. Student Demographics by Charter Schools
(in Percent of Total School Enrollment)**

	Free/Reduced- Price Lunch	Special Education	Gifted & Talented	Limited English Proficient	Title I
1. Anser Charter School	0	13	10	1.4	0
2. Blackfoot Community Center School	65	20	0	0	0
3. Coeur d' Alene Charter Academy	0	<1	0	0	0
4. Hidden Springs Charter School	0	3.8	0	1.63	0
5. Idaho Leadership Academy	48	4	8	0	0
6. Idaho Virtual Academy	34	.06	.06	0	.34
7. Idaho Virtual High School		Unknown			
8. Liberty Charter School	24.4	7	4	0	0
9. Meridian Charter School	6	1	20	0	0
10. Meridian Medical Arts Charter School	13.9	9.6	0	0	0
11. Moscow Charter School	28	.45	.018	0	.09
12. North Star Public Charter School	0	3	0	0	0
13. Pocatello Community Charter School	34	17	4	0	0
14. Renaissance Charter School		Not Available			
15. Sandpoint Charter School	0	20	0	<1	0
16. White Pine Charter School		Not Available			

SOURCE: Charter schools reported their own students' demographic information.

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM

Data reported from 13 Idaho charter schools indicates that most of them were using multiple educational programs. Eighty-five percent of these schools offered character education, and over half of these schools provided hands-on experiences (77 percent), thematic/interdisciplinary instruction (69 percent), service learning (62 percent), and foreign language at all grade levels (54 percent). Table 5 summarizes the different educational approaches reported by Idaho charter schools in 2003-04.

Table 5. Educational Programs Used

	Total* % Using	Anser	Blackfoot	Coeur d'Alene	Hidden Springs	Idaho Leadership Academy	Idaho Virtual Academy	Idaho Virtual High School**	Liberty	Meridian	Meridian Medical	Moscow	North Star	Pocatello	Renaissance**	Sandpoint	White Pine
Character Instruction	85	Y†	Y		Y	Y	Y	NOT REPORTED	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y	NOT REPORTED	Y	NOT REPORTED
E.D. Hirsch's Core Knowledge	.07						Y										
Foreign Language At All Grades	54	Y			Y				Y	Y	Y	Y	Y				
Hands-On	77	Y	Y				Y		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	
Individualized Education Plans	38	Y	Y								Y	Y				Y	
Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound	15	Y												Y			
Multiage/Grade	46	Y	Y			Y	Y					Y		Y			
Multiple Intelligences	46				Y	Y	Y		Y			Y		Y			
Service Learning	62	Y			Y	Y			Y		Y		Y	Y		Y	
Technology as Major Focus	38	Y							Y	Y	Y	Y					
Thematic/Interdisciplinary	69		Y			Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y		Y		Y	
Project Based	23					Y			Y	Y							
Block Scheduling	46	Y	Y			Y				Y	Y	Y					
Year-Round	15						Y		Y								
Extended Year/Day	23	Y	Y	Y													

*Percent of the 13 schools that reported the data. Idaho Virtual High School, Renaissance Charter School, White Pine Charter.

†Y = Yes. **Did not report data.

Table 6. Assessment Tools Used in Idaho Charter School

	Number of Schools Using	Anser	Blackfoot	Coeur d'Alene	Hidden Springs	Idaho Leadership Academy	Idaho Virtual Academy	Idaho Virtual High School	Liberty	Meridian Technical	Meridian Medical	Moscow	North Star	Pocatello	Renaissance	Sandpoint	White Pine
Idaho Reading Indicator*	8	•	•		•		•		•			•	•	•	N O T R E P O R T E D		N O T R E P O R T E D
Direct Mathematics Assessment*	11	•	•	•	•		•		•		•	•	•	•		•	
Nat'l Assessment of Education Progress	1													•			
Idaho Standards Ach. Test* (ISAT)	14	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	
ACT/COMPASS/PLAN	3								•	•	•						
District/School Criterion Ref'd	2			•									•				
Other norm referenced	4								•	•	•	•					
Portfolios	9	•				•	•		•	•	•	•		•		•	
Individualized Education Plans	7	•	•			•	•			•				•		•	
School Developed Assessments	9	•			•	•	•		•	•	•			•		•	

*Currently required by the state for various grade levels.

Direct Writing Assessment data was not provided by the NWREL

Student Services

Student services include counseling, after-school programs, special education, lunch programs, and transportation. Table 7 summarizes various student services provided by each of the charter schools (indicated by a black dot). All charter schools provided services to special education students. Nine of 14 schools reported here provided such services on their own and the rest of the schools did so either through district or other service providers. Ten of 14 schools had after-school programs on their own. Most charter schools served students lunch at their school sites.

Table 7. Student Services Provided by Charter Schools

	Counseling	Special Ed	After School	Lunch	Transportation
1. Anser Charter School	•	•	•	•	
2. Blackfoot Community Center School	•	•	•	•	•
3. Coeur d' Alene Charter Academy	•	•	•		
4. Hidden Springs Charter School	•	•	•		
5. Idaho Leadership Academy	•	•		•	•
6. Idaho Virtual Academy		•	NA	NA	NA
7. Idaho Virtual High School		•	NA	NA	NA
8. Liberty Charter School	•	•	•	•	•
9. Meridian Charter School	•	•	•	•	•
10. Meridian Medical Arts Charter School	•	•	•	•	•
11. Moscow Charter School	•	•	•	•	•
12. North Star Public Charter School		•		•	
13. Pocatello Community Charter School	•	•	•	•	
14. Renaissance Charter School	Data Not Available				
15. Sandpoint Charter School	•	•	•	•	
16. White Pine Charter School	Data Not Available				

Facility

Charter schools are housed in a variety of buildings. The facilities range from new buildings designed specifically for the school to temporary leased space in retail locations. Of the 11 non-virtual schools reporting on this indicator, six had permanent facilities and all 11 were handicap-accessible. Building sizes for non-virtual charter schools range from 4,400 to 37,000 square feet, and average 18,898 square feet. Space ranges from 42 to 229 square feet per student and averages 103 square feet per student. Table 8 shows national and Idaho charter school averages and ranges of facility square footage per student⁴. The average square footage per student in charter schools is between 9 and 58 square feet less than that of other schools nationally, depending on grade level. Idaho does not place square footage requirements on any of its schools. The two virtual schools each have office space, and one has a testing center; these schools are not included in the charter school average.

⁴ Because the charter school grade configurations do not follow the traditional “elementary, middle, and high school” separations, their figures are not broken out as they are in the national figures.

Table 8. Average Facility Square Footage per Student

	Average	Range
Elementary School Buildings		
National Average	112	77–147
Middle School Buildings		
National Average	154	114–212
High School Buildings		
National Average	161	123 –211
Idaho Charter Schools		
Charter School Average	103	42–229

SOURCE FOR NATIONAL AVERAGES: The Council of Educational Facility Planners

Calendar and Scheduling

The charter schools serve students an average of 174 days per year; the number of days ranges from 152 to 190. Four of the 12 reporting charter schools follow their district's calendars. Fifteen percent of the schools have year-round scheduling, and 23 percent have an extended day.

School Goals

Schools report that they are meeting the majority of their goals. Of the 121 goals that the schools have collectively, nearly two-thirds (72) are related to student performance. Most of the student performance goals are reported as being met (68 percent) or exceeded (15 percent). All Idaho charter schools used multiple tools to assess their student academic performance and are part of Idaho statewide assessment: Idaho Reading Indicator, Direct Mathematics Assessment, and Idaho Standards Achievement Test. Charter schools also used portfolios, individualized education/learning plans, and school developed tools to assess their student performance. Specific student academic performance data can be found in profiles of charter schools included in the appendix.)

Of the 46 goals related to school performance, nearly all are reported as being met (50 percent) or exceeded (39 percent). Ten schools provided evidence to support their levels of accomplishment. See individual school profiles for each school's goals, methods used to reach the goals, levels, and evidence of accomplishment. Two of the charter schools have modified their goals from their original charter; in both cases, the changes were made in order to align the goals to state standards.

Figure 2. Charter Schools' Level of Accomplishment on Student Performance Goals (Self-Reported)

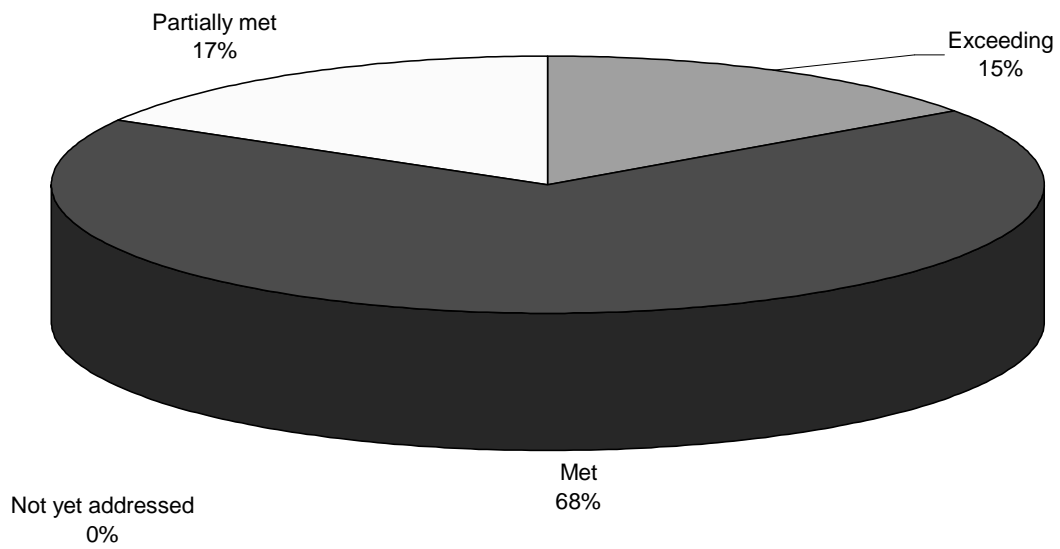
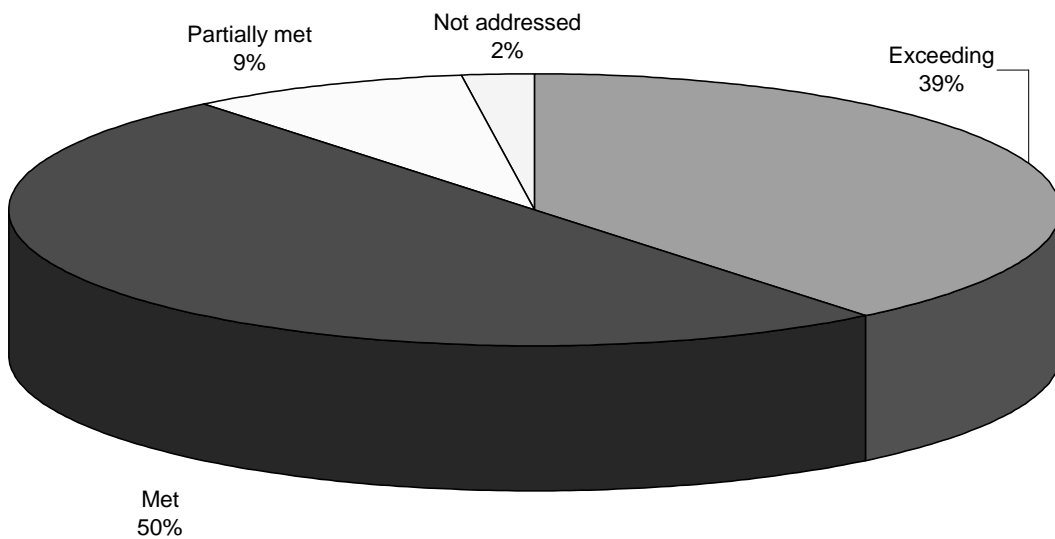


Figure 3. Charter Schools' Level of Accomplishment on Organizational Goals (Self-Reported)



Amendments and Waivers

Several schools have taken advantage of their autonomy as charters. Ten schools have made amendments to their charters. Examples range from minor changes to reflect curriculum changes to adding additional grade levels and expanding enrollment boundaries. Two schools have requested waivers; both of these schools had also made amendments to their charters. The waivers included application for consultant specialist status and the reading endorsement requirement.

Four schools have taken advantage of exemptions in board rule (those which are not in Code), such as adding flexibility to the salary schedule and the implementation of additional educational standards.

Staff Characteristics

Six schools have more than one administrator, and four schools have an administrator teaching in the classroom. The schools employ a total of 218 teachers, 161 of whom are full-time employees. Teachers have an average of eight years of experience, and 30 percent have advanced (graduate) degrees. Eighty percent of teachers are certified instructors, and 10 percent are consultant specialists. Five percent are teaching outside of the area in which they are certified. All but two of the reporting schools have special education instructors.

Only two of the schools say they have had difficulty recruiting teachers citing remote locations as the reason. A total of 11 staff have departed the charter schools this year; reasons include termination, moving out of the area, returning to school, retirement, and death.

Governance and Policies

Charter school boards tend to be comprised primarily of community members and parents. A total of 85 individuals participate on Idaho charter school boards. As Figure 5 illustrates, 49 percent of all board members are parents, and 44 percent are community members. Four schools have teachers on their boards, which comprise 5 percent of all members. Only one school has students on its board, which comprise 2 percent of all board members. Four of the schools have board members who are related to school personnel.

Only a few schools have adopted district policies; most have created their own policies for things such as admission, attendance, discipline, and grading. Table 9 shows the number of schools adopting policies from their sponsoring districts.

Figure 4. Average Representation on Charter School Boards

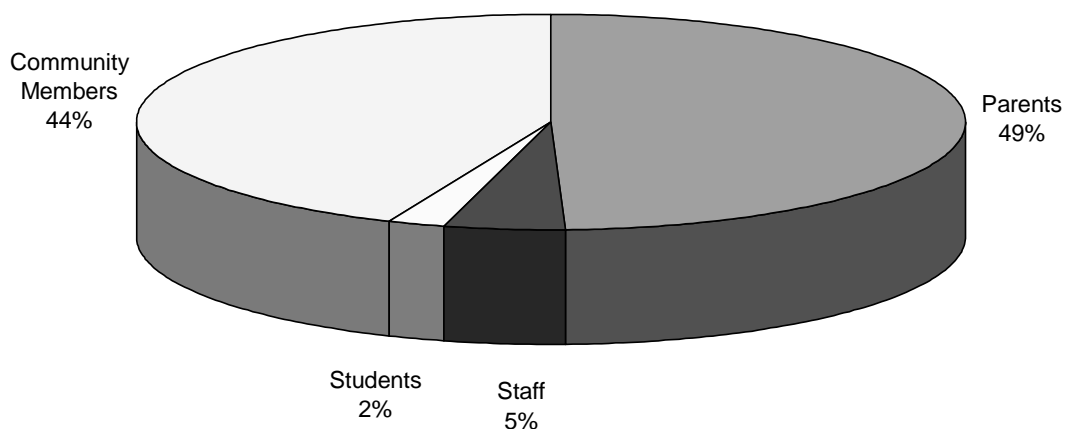


Table 9. Number of Schools That Adopted Policies from Their Sponsoring District

Policy Area	Number of Schools Adopting
Admissions	2
Attendance	2
Discipline	1
Grading	0

Operating Budgets and Funding

Operating Budgets

Operating budgets of charter schools range widely and are mainly proportional to enrollment. Budgets for the 2003-2004 school year ranged from \$447,365 to \$8,500,000, and averaged \$1,707,635. Salaries comprise, on average, 50 percent of charter school budgets, with a range of 19 to 80 percent. Figure 6 and Table 10 illustrate annual operating budgets and enrollment for each charter school.

Figure 5. Annual Operating Budgets and Enrollment

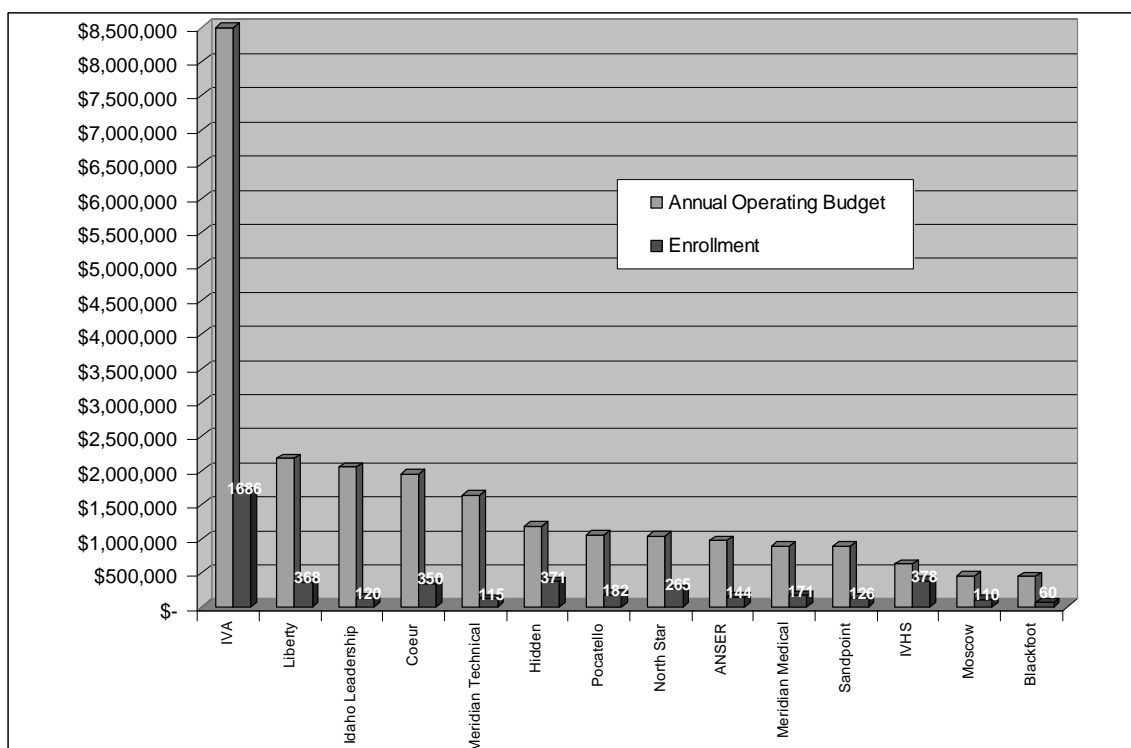


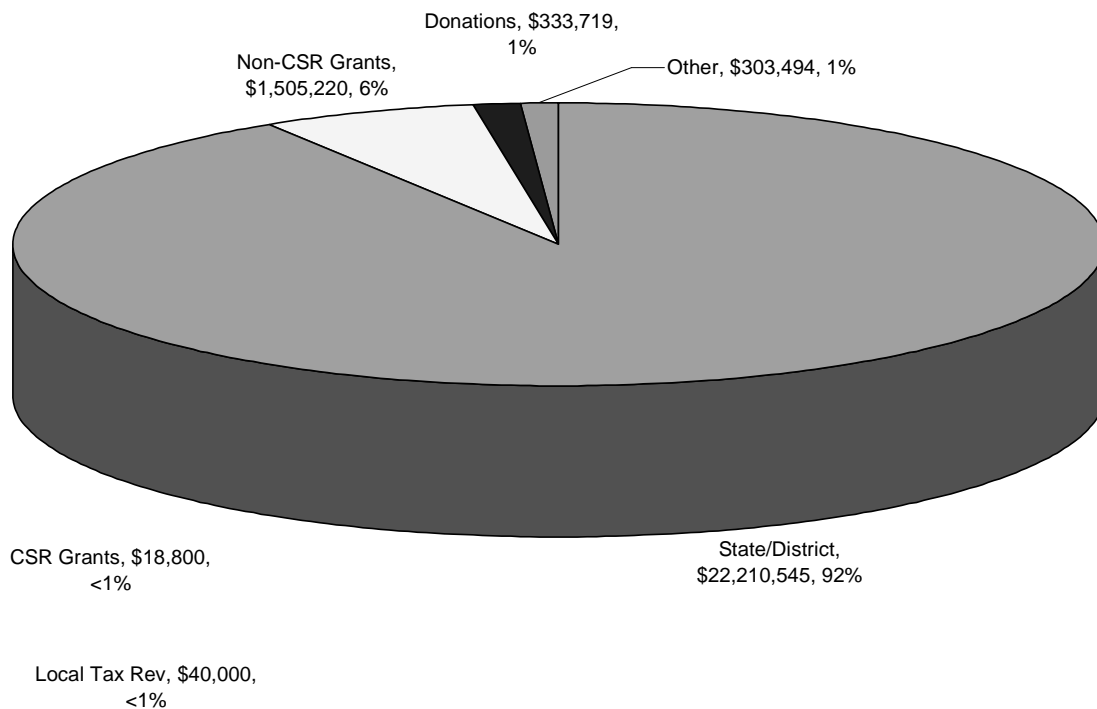
Table 10. Annual Budgets of Charter Schools vs. Enrollment

	Annual Budget (\$)	Enrollment
IVA	8,500,000	1,686
Liberty	2,180,000	368
Idaho Leadership	2,052,639	120
Coeur d'Alene	1,946,000	350
Meridian Technical	1,641,576	115
Hidden	1,189,044	371
Pocatello	1,062,767	182
North Star	1,036,658	265
ANSER	977,494	144
Meridian Medical	894,023	171
Sandpoint	890,000	126
IVHS	629,938	378
Moscow	459,382	110
Blackfoot	447,365	60
Renaissance	Not reported	
White Pine	Not reported	

Funding

Idaho's charter schools receive funding through several streams, the main two being state and district monies. A total of \$22,210,545 was received during the 2003-2004 school year; this accounted for 92 percent of charter funding. Funding included state enhancement money for programs such as technology, reading, gifted and talented, and limited English proficient. Lottery money was also received. Idaho charter schools also receive money from additional sources, including grants (such as Comprehensive School Reform) and donations. Figure 7 illustrates the sources and amounts of funding received during 2003-2004.

Figure 6. Types and Sources of Funding Received by Schools

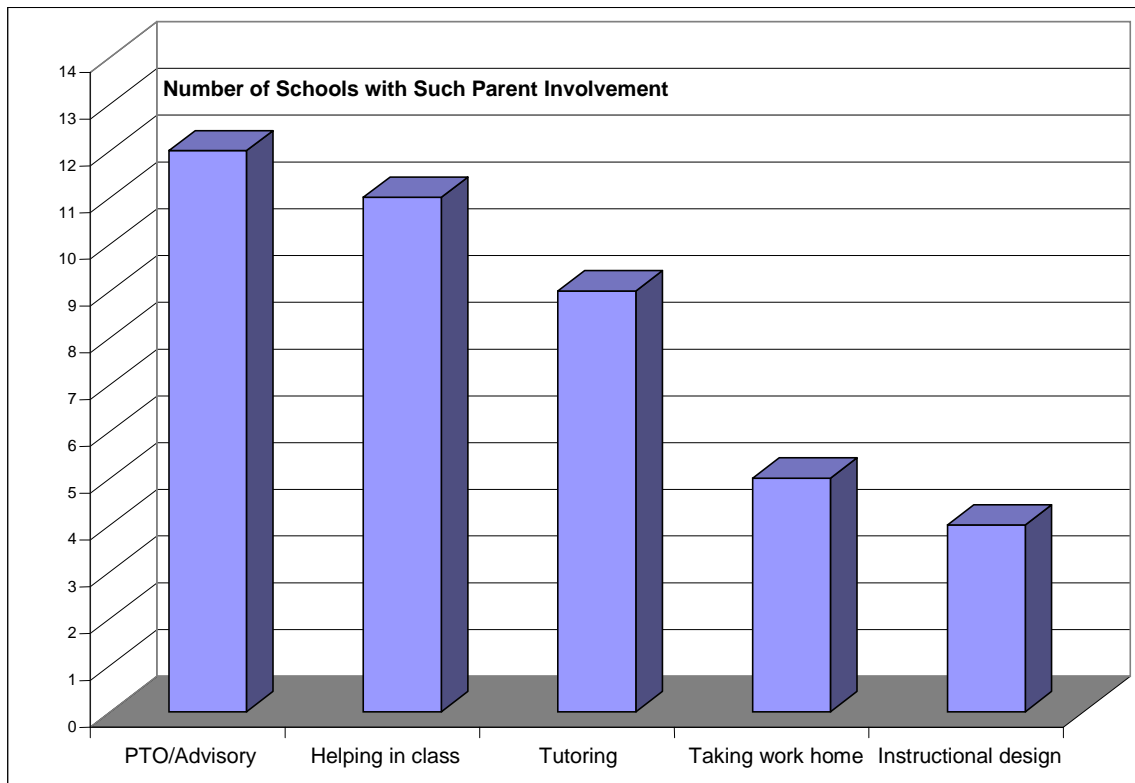


School-Family-Community Partnerships

Parent Involvement

Parents are involved with charter schools in a variety of ways. Figure 8 shows the number of schools that have parents involved in parent-teacher organizations or advisory committees (where all but two reporting schools involve parents), board membership, helping in class, tutoring, taking work home, and instructional design.

Figure 7. Parent Involvement in Schools



Business Partnerships

Out of 14 school profiles available for 2003-04, it was found that five schools have business partnerships and one school is developing one. In 2002-2003 (Year 4 of the evaluation), 10 schools reported they had business partnerships. The business partnership took place in various forms, which include directing donations, providing internship opportunities, and directly participating in the educational activities of these schools. At Anser Charter School, 40 agencies were involved in their community-based curriculum and approximately five to 10 community members from Treasure Valley participated in classroom activities such as being a visiting field guide. Students from Meridian Charter High School served 280 hours internship with local businesses in their areas of technical expertise. A total of 44 businesses in the community hosted their senior interns.

Recruitment and Marketing

The majority of schools market themselves through newspapers and three use radio as a means of advertisement. Only one school uses Spanish language media. Other means of marketing include word of mouth, web sites, cottage meetings, referrals, high school counselors, and the Chamber of Commerce.

CHARTER SCHOOL SURVEYS

Three different surveys were administered to charter school stakeholders in spring 2004: parents, students, and staff, to obtain each group's perceptions and opinions about their schools. Schools were asked to administer the surveys to all staff members who had regular contact with students and all students in the 4th grade and above. Student and staff surveys were completed online. Parents were given the option of completing either an on-line or hardcopy survey.

Table 11 summarizes the number of surveys returned and the response rate for each of the surveys from each charter school. Fifty-one percent (or 1,449 students) of 2,842 fourth graders or above responded; 63 percent (or 239 staff members) of 381 staff members responded, 239 completed the survey; and 38 percent (or 986 parents) of 2,494 families responded.

Table 11. Number of Survey Administered and Return Rate From Each of Charter Schools

School	Students		Parents		Staff	
	Number	Return Rate (%)	Number	Return Rate (%)	Number	Return Rate (%)
Anser	68	100	57	67	18	78
Blackfoot	21	100	18	50	7	58
Coeur d'Alene	266	74	136	49	25	74
Hidden Springs	60	37	96	44	11	37
Idaho Leadership Academy	93	69	38	34	13	62
Idaho Virtual Academy	65	8	197	36	34	60
Virtual High School	0	0	0	0	0	0
Liberty	158	61	75	36	17	38
Meridian	159	94	67	39	17	81
Medical	112	97	44	39	11	92
Moscow	33	89	16	16	16	89
North Star	147	97	74	54	25	81
Pocatello	74	74	47	39	11	48
Renaissance	30	97	22	44	8	80
Sandpoint	97	76	48	39	14	93
White Pine	66	97	51	40	12	100
Total and Average Return Rate	1,449	51	986	38	239	63

Survey Findings

The following table summarizes the overall responses of stakeholders by school. It should be noted that not all respondents answered all questions on their surveys; thus, when percentages are shown, they are given as percentages of those responding to a particular question, not of the total number of surveys returned.

Table 12. Percent of Respondents by School

School	Students Percent of total (n = 1449)	Parents Percent of total (n = 986)	Staff Percent of total (n = 239)
Anser	5	6	8
Blackfoot	1	2	3
Coeur d'Alene	18	14	10
Hidden Springs	4	10	5
Idaho Leadership Academy	6	4	5
Idaho Virtual Academy	4	20	14
Virtual High School	0	0	0
Liberty	11	8	7
Meridian	11	7	7
Medical	8	4	5
Moscow	2	2	7
North Star	10	8	10
Pocatello	5	5	5
Renaissance	2	2	3
Sandpoint	7	5	6
White Pine	5	5	5
Total	100	100	100

Staff Survey

Most of the 239 respondents are teachers (70 percent). An additional 13 percent have teaching roles as instructors, teaching assistants, or student teachers. Approximately 7 percent (16 respondents) are administrators, with four respondents being both an administrator and a teacher. Forty-one percent of the respondents (97) are founders or original staff members of the school.

The staff respondents reported having taught in a number of different types of schools with an average of 9.5 years of school-related work experience (median years of experience = 7). Seventy percent of the respondents had worked in public schools for an

average of 8.4 years. Nearly one-fourth of the respondents had previously worked in a private or parochial school for an average of 3.9 years. The respondents have been at the current charter school for an average of 2.5 years.

Two-thirds of the respondents are certified to teach in the state. About 12 percent are teaching in areas outside of their endorsements.

Ninety percent of the staff reported that their experience at the school was meeting their initial expectations. Eighty percent of them reported that charter schools did a good job in serving students with special needs.

Reasons for Working at the Charter School

Staff were asked to rate the importance of several factors in their decision to seek or retain employment at their charter school. Figure 8 illustrates these responses, with reasons ranked in order of importance. The responses are shown as averages, where a response of 1 = “not important,” 2 = “somewhat important,” and 3 = “very important.” The top reasons for working at the charter school involve the curriculum and professional opportunities. Approximately 80-83 percent of the respondents rated the academics and the educational program as being “very important” in their decision (average ratings 2.8 of 3.0.) The least important reasons included difficulty in finding other positions (1.4), convenient location (1.9), and salary (1.9).

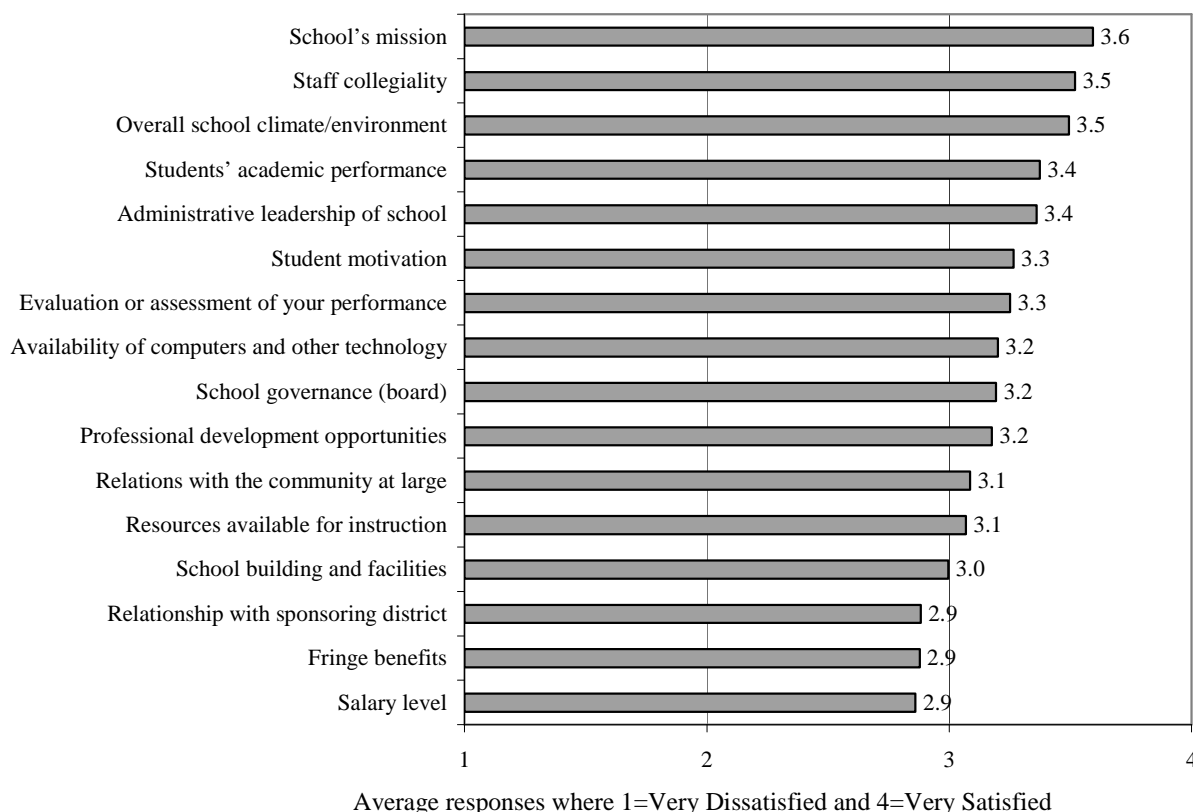
Figure 8. Reasons for Working at the Charter School



Aspects of Job and School Environment

Staff were asked to rate their satisfaction with various aspects of their job and the school environment on a 4-point scale where 1 = “very dissatisfied” and 4 = “very satisfied.” Figure 9 shows average responses relating to various aspects of their job and school environment. Staff members expressed a strong commitment to the school mission; nearly all were satisfied (32 percent) or very satisfied (64 percent) with their school mission. Similarly rated are staff collegiality, administrative leadership, the overall school environment, and the students’ academic performance. As previously noted, the staff indicated that academic issues and working with like-minded educators were of primary importance in selecting a position and, in turn, they rate their charter school favorably in these areas.

Figure 9. Staff Satisfaction with Aspects of Their Job and School Environment

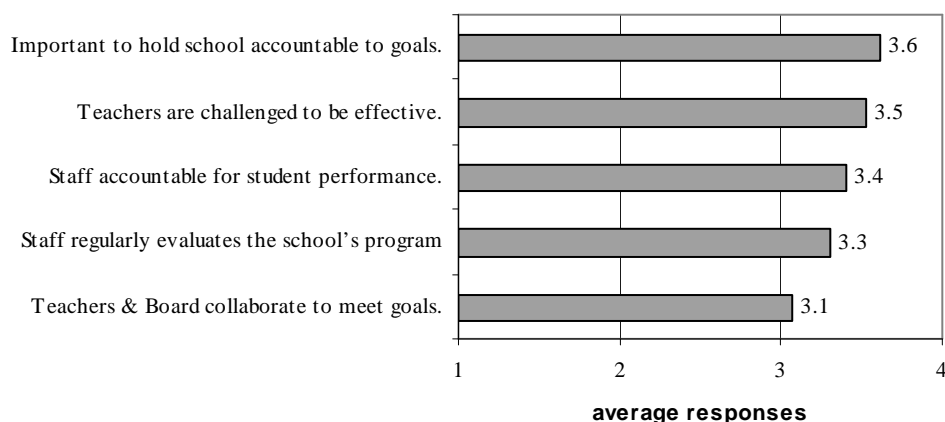


Staff Ratings of School Outcomes

Staff members were asked to rate their agreement with a number of statements about their school. For analysis purposes, these statements are grouped into the following categories: staff accountability, teacher autonomy, staff outlook, student needs, and parent/community support. The average responses are presented in figures 10 to 12 below using a 4-point scale where 1 = “strongly disagree” and 4 = “strongly agree.”

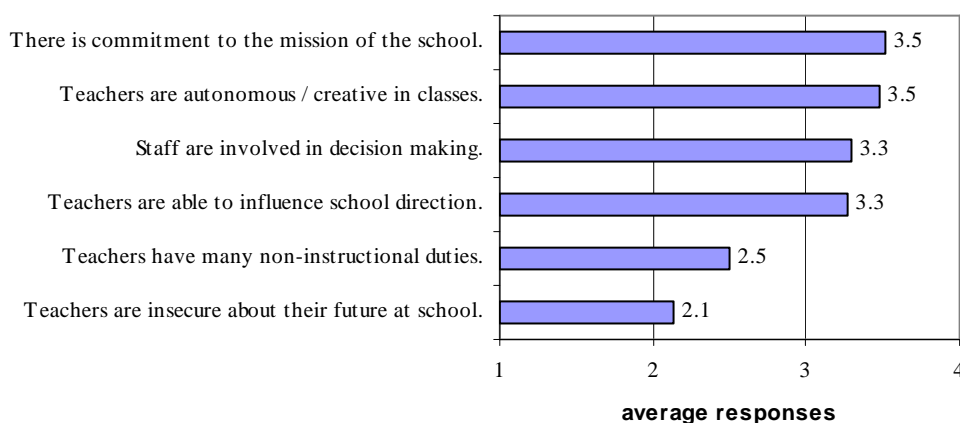
As presented in Figure 10, staff members feel very strongly that the school should be held accountable to performance goals (average rating 3.6). Furthermore, staff believe that they were held accountable and challenged to be effective.

Figure 10. Staff Accountability



The staff gave fairly high ratings to the school in the area of teacher autonomy. As depicted in Figure 11, average ratings in this area range from 3.3 to 3.5. (The two areas of markedly lower average ratings are for negatively phrased autonomous issues.) Teachers again affirm their commitment to the school's mission. Almost all agreed or strongly agreed (96 percent) that they had autonomy in the classroom. To a slightly less extent, staff agreed or strongly agreed that they were involved in the decision-making or were able to influence the direction of the school. Half reported that they had many non-instructional duties and approximately one-fourth of the teachers were feeling insecure about their future.

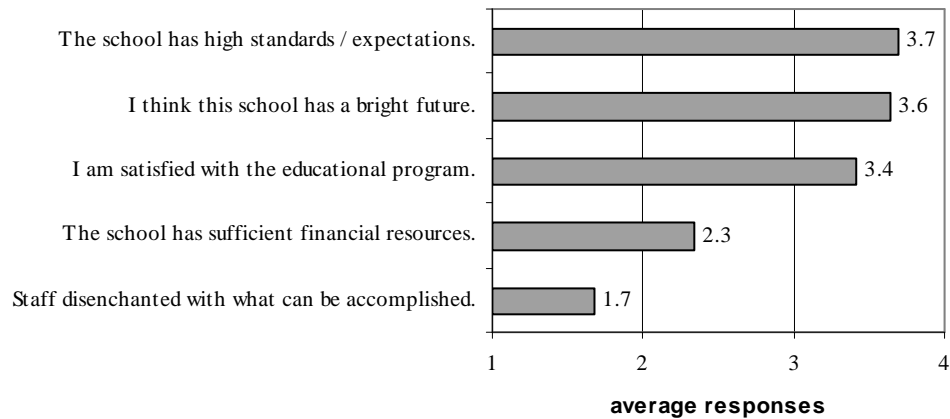
Figure 11. Teacher Autonomy



Staff members rated their schools very positively in general. They agreed that their schools had high standards, a bright future, and quality instruction. As Figure 12 depicts, average ratings range from 3.4 to 3.7 for these three issues. Furthermore, 71 to 73 percent

of the staff members gave the highest rating of 4 on a 4-point scale regarding the school's standards and their overall outlook for the school. Over half of the staff (57 percent) expressed concern over the level of the school's financial resources.

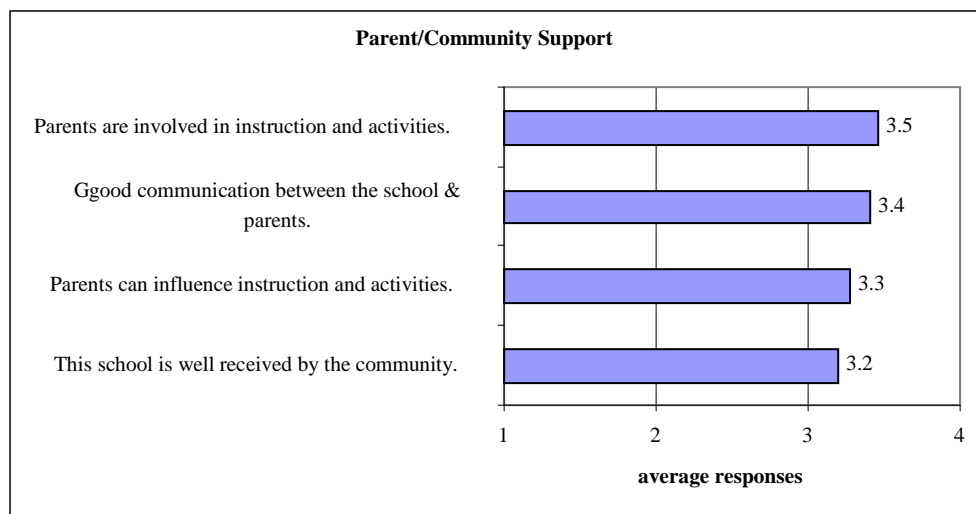
Figure 12. Staff Outlook on Global School Issues



Parent/Community Support

The staff/parent relationship was perceived by staff to be strong. The average ratings on this relationship are presented in Figure 13. Nearly all staff members agreed to some extent that parents are involved in instruction and activities (53 percent “strongly agree”). Slightly fewer staff members agreed that parents have influence in instruction activities (37 percent “strongly agreed”). They gave high ratings to the communication between staff and parents (average rating 3.4.) Notably, staff gave a moderately high rating to the school/community relationship (average rating 3.2.)

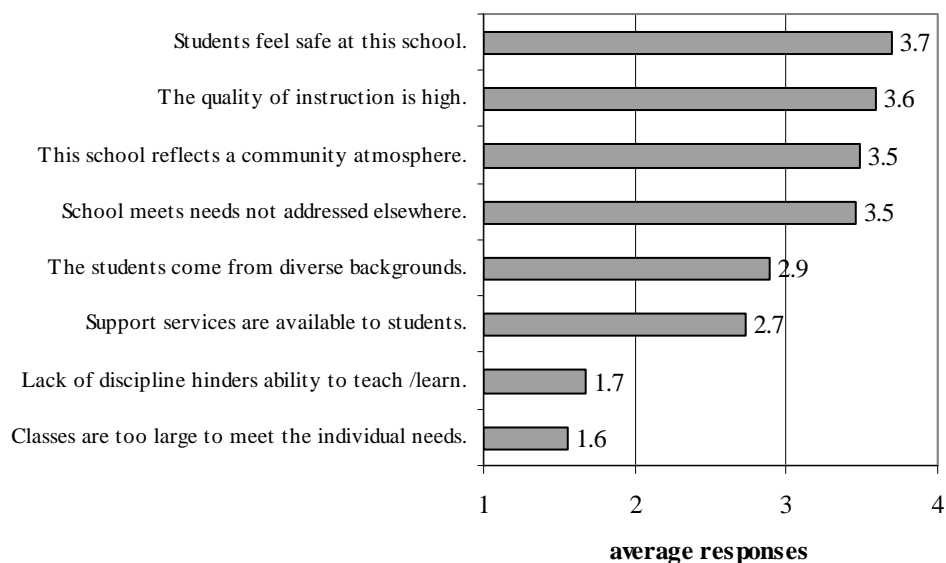
Figure 13. Parent/Community Support



Rating the School on Meeting Student Needs

Staff rated their schools positively on meeting student needs. As Figure 14 depicts, their rating on most student need issues ranged from 3.5 to 3.7. They reported that their schools provide a safe environment (3.7), quality instruction (3.6) and a community atmosphere (3.5). Most (94 percent) viewed their schools as being unique and meeting student needs that are not addressed at other schools. A notably lower rating was on the availability of support services (2.7). Only 11 percent viewed discipline in the classroom a problem and 7 percent considered the classes in their schools too large.

Figure 14. Student Needs



Staff Development Opportunities

Table 13 presents the percent of respondents who have participated in a given training/class in the last year. Approximately one-third to one-half of staff members participated in every type of professional training opportunity listed.

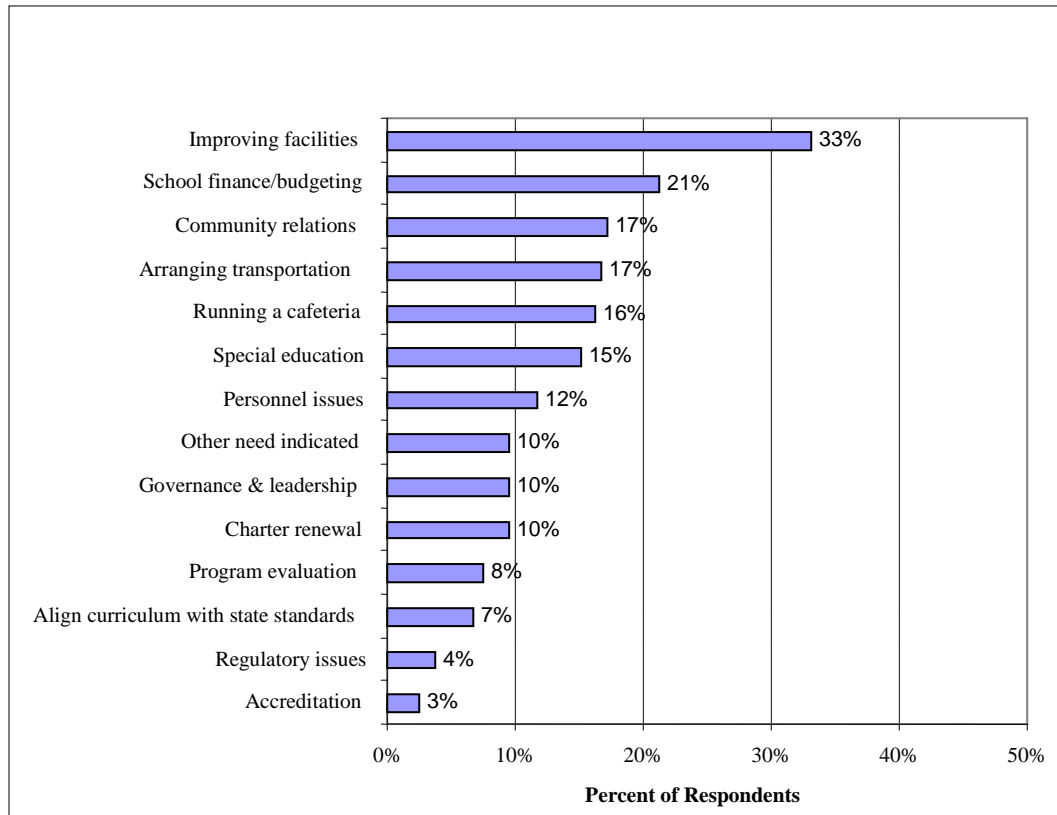
Table 13. Professional Development Opportunities Available in the Last Year

Professional Development Opportunities	Percent
on-site training	60
collaboration to increase student performance	54
state/national workshops	44
coursework	36
district in-service	35
other opportunities	11

Technical Assistance Needs

Staff members were asked to indicate the areas of technical assistance needed at the school. Figure 15 lists the percent of respondents that included a given need. Ten percent or fewer indicated that technical assistance was needed in half of the areas listed. The highest need cited, by approximately 33 percent of the respondents, was in the area of improving facilities, followed by school financing (21 percent).

Figure 15. Technical Assistance Needs



Staff Evaluation

Staff report being professionally evaluated in a variety of ways: The majority of respondents were evaluated through regular observation (62 percent) and an annual formal review (50 percent). A parent survey serves as a form of evaluation for one third of staff and a peer review process was used by 20 percent of the respondents. Only 4 percent of staff and teachers report they were never evaluated.

Greatest Strengths and Challenges

When asked about the greatest strengths and challenges of their charter schools, the following were cited most frequently:

Greatest Strengths

- Commitment
- Collaboration
- School mission
- Strong curriculum
- School climate and size
- Parent involvement
- High expectations of students by staff

Greatest Challenges

- Temporary facilities
- Funding structure
- School board
- Curriculum
- School size
- Energy spent on combating negative public perceptions

Student Survey

Students in grades 4 through 12 from 15 charter schools in the district provided feedback on their charter school. A total of 1,449 students were included in the analysis. Table 14 presents the number/percent of respondents by grade. The survey respondents are evenly distributed across grades with the exception of grades 11 and 12.

Table 14. Respondents by Grade Level

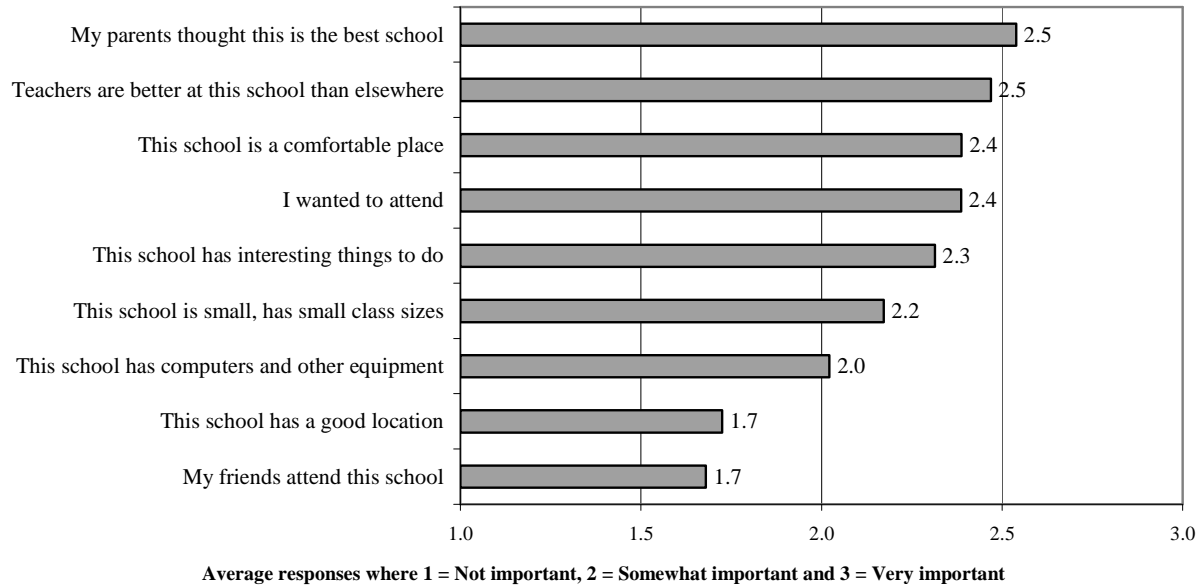
Grade	Number	Percent
4	170	13
5	181	12
5/6	6	0.4
6	174	12
7	220	15
8	154	11
9	200	14
10	165	11
11	79	5
12	59	4
Missing grade	41	3
Total	1,449	100

Forty-seven percent (or 662) of the student respondents were the first-year students in charter schools. Of these first-year students, 80 percent had previously been enrolled in a regular public school. Approximately 12 percent reported to have been home schooled and 9 percent reported to have attended a private/parochial school. When asked how interested they are in their school work at the charter school compared to their previous schools, 60 percent of the first-year students reported they were becoming more interested in their school work.

Reasons for Attending Charter School

First year students were asked to indicate, from a list of reasons, why they decided to attend the charter school. Students rated the reasons using a 3-point scale, where a 1 = “not important,” 2 = “somewhat important,” and 3 = “very important.” Figure 16 presents the average ratings.

Figure 16. Reasons for Attending Charter School



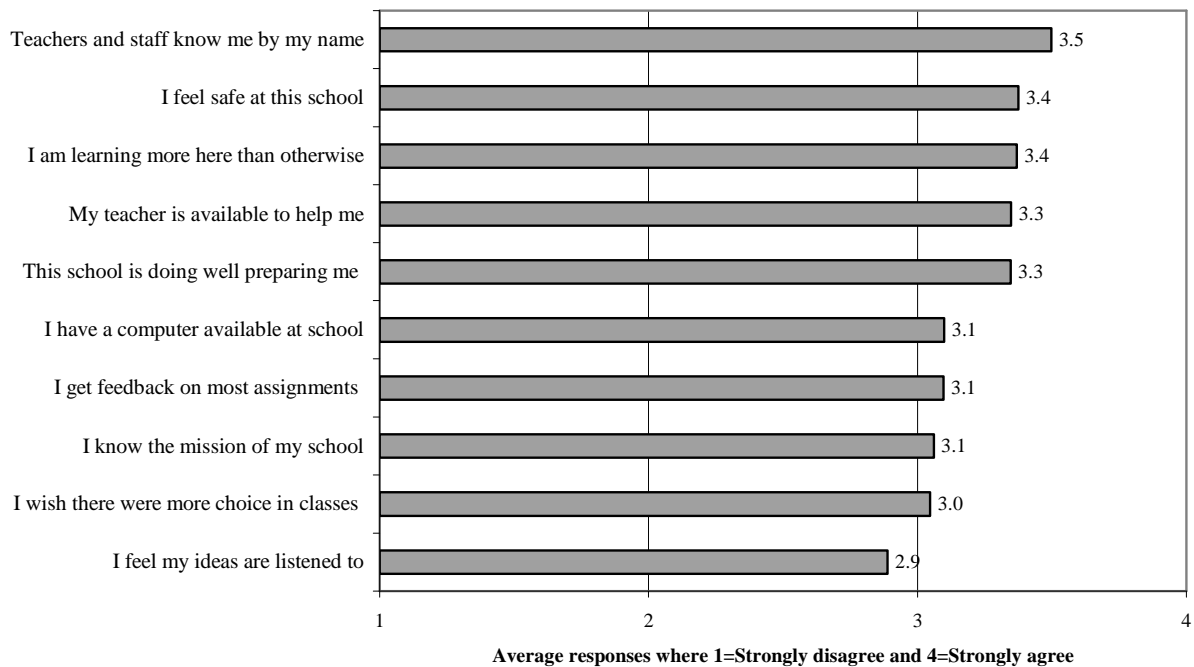
Most students reported that they attend the charter school primarily because their parent thought the school was the best school for them (average rating of 2.5 of 3.0). Approximately 64 percent of the students also reported that parental preference was very important in this decision. However, 57 percent of the students rated their personal preference as being very important in the decision as well (average rating 2.4.) The other top choice included the perception that teachers are better at the charter school than elsewhere (2.5). Most students felt their charter schools are a comfortable place (2.4) with interesting things to do (2.3). Class size (2.2) and the availability of computers (2.0) were rated as being “somewhat important”; and lowest priority was given to the attendance of friends (1.7) and location (1.7).

Personal School Experience

All students were asked to rate particular aspects of their school experience using a 4-point scale where 1 = “strongly disagree” and 4 = “strongly agree.” Figure 17 below presents the average ratings. Sixty-five percent of student respondents rated their overall charter school experience as being “excellent” or “good.”

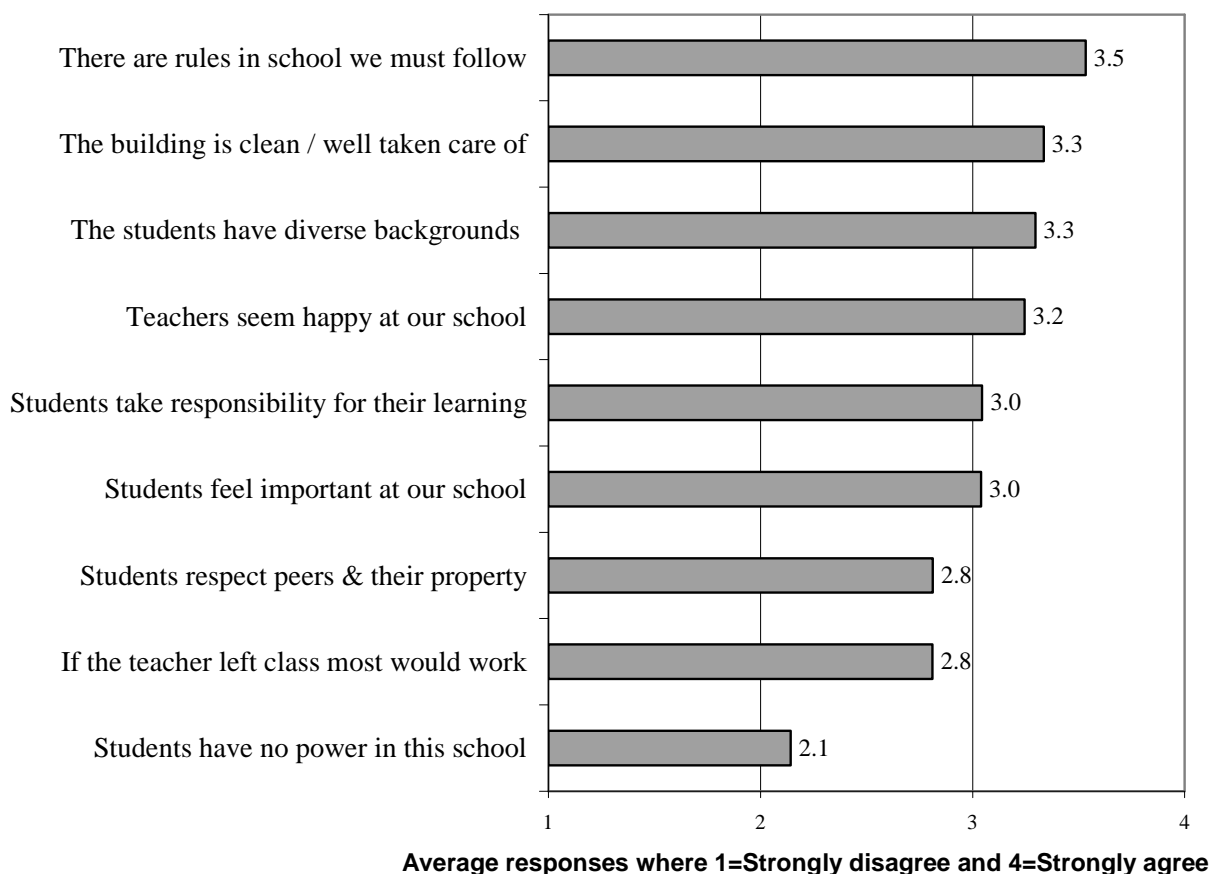
The students gave mixed ratings to their teachers. They agreed that they are learning more at charter schools than elsewhere (average rating 3.4) and that teachers know who they are (3.5). There is slightly less agreement regarding the level of academic preparation and the availability of the teachers for help (average ratings of 3.3). Students give moderate ratings to their teachers regarding providing feedback on assignments (average rating 3.1) or welcoming student input (average ratings 2.9). Students wish there were more choices in classes (3.0), a curriculum issue that is linked to available resources.

Figure 17. Agreement with Statements about Students' Experiences



Approximately 70 percent of the students had a positive overall perception of the academic environment in their schools. Students also provided feedback on other aspects of the school using a 4-point scale where 1 = “strongly disagree” and 4 = “strongly agree.” Figure 19 below presents the average ratings. The students gave their school high ratings regarding the overall environment and lower ratings regarding issues involving student ethics and responsibility.

Figure 18. Agreement with Statements about the School



Students were asked what they liked and disliked the most about their school. The following list summarizes the most frequently cited responses:

Positive

- Challenging curriculum
- Availability of computers
- Teacher quality, personal interactions
- Welcoming environment
- Small classes
- Friendly students
- Safe environment

Negative

- Lack of electives/ limited choice in classes
- Lack of extra curricular activities
- Too many rules/ unfair rules
- Bullies/mean students
- Dress code / uniforms
- Stealing
- Too much homework
- Too technology focused / not enough art

Parent Survey

A total of 1,015 charter school parents responded to the survey. Table 15 shows the number and percent of these respondents by school. Almost 20 percent of the respondents are parents with children attending Idaho Virtual Academy.

Table 15. Parent Survey: Respondents by School

School	Number	Percent
Anser	58	6
Blackfoot	18	2
Coeur d'Alene	144	14
Hidden Springs	102	10
Idaho Leadership Academy	39	4
Idaho Virtual Academy	196	19
Liberty	82	8
Meridian	69	7
Medical	44	4
Moscow	18	2
North Star	75	7
Pocatello	48	5
Renaissance	22	2
Sandpoint	49	5
White Pine	51	5
Total	1,015	100

Sixty-one percent of parents (609) have only one child enrolled in charter schools, 27 percent (272) have two children enrolled, and 11 percent (112) have three or more children enrolled. Thirty-nine percent of responding parents have had their children enrolled in charter schools for more than two years.

Parents were asked how many miles away from the charter school they lived. Excluding the parents whose children are enrolled at the Virtual Academy, 10 percent of the families live within one mile of the school and 60 percent live within five miles. Approximately 83 percent live within 10 miles of the school.

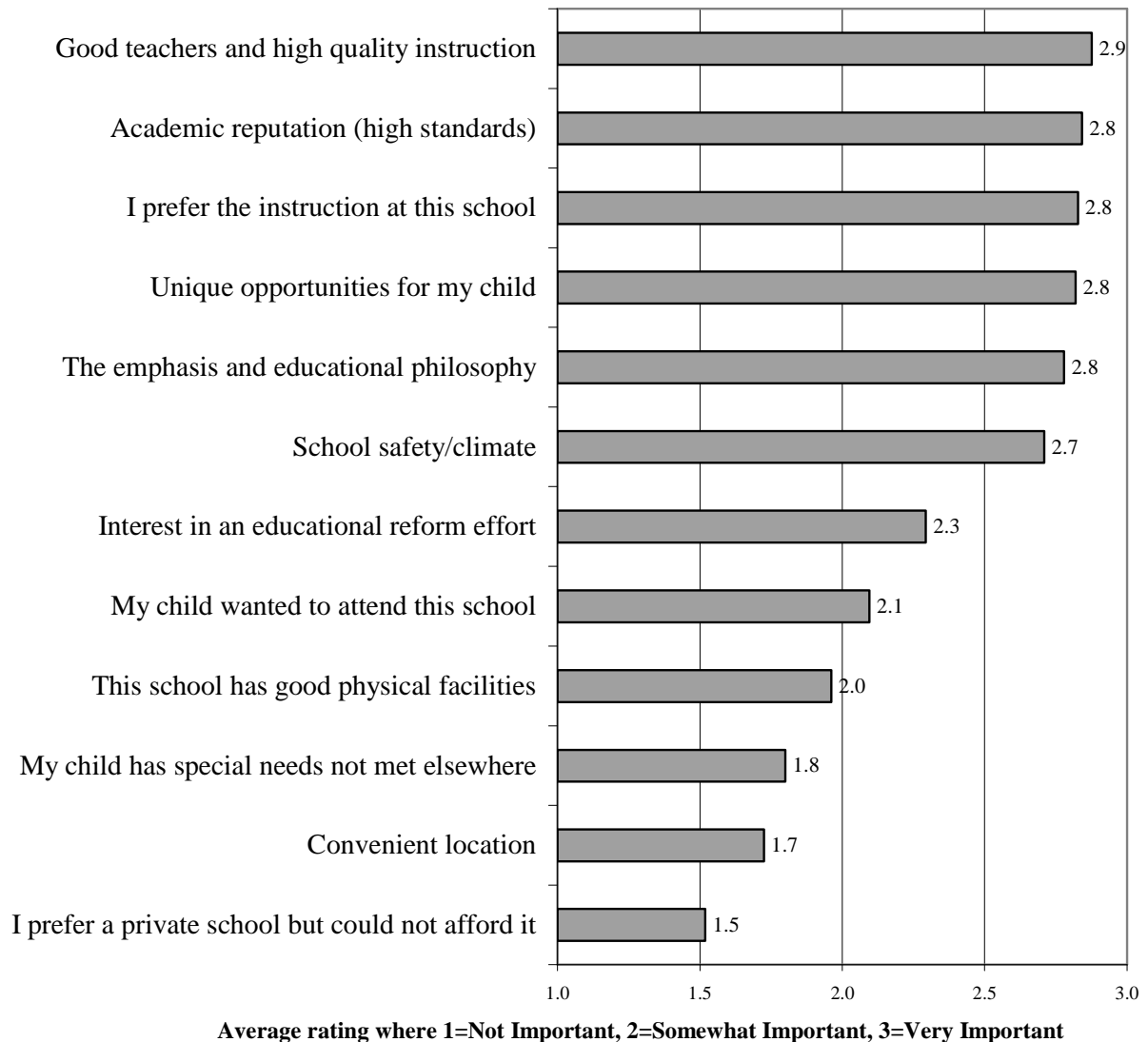
When asked what kind(s) of school their children previously attended before their current charter school, 67 percent of parents responded “conventional public school.” Approximately 17 percent of students had previously attended private/parochial school, and 18 percent of respondents had home-schooled their children.

Reasons for Sending Their Children to Charter Schools

Parents were asked to rate the importance of several factors in their decision to enroll their children in the charter school. Figure 19 illustrates these responses, with reasons

ranked in order of importance. The responses are shown as averages, where a response of 1 = “not important,” 2 = “somewhat important,” and 3 = “very important.”

Figure 19. Reasons for Sending Child to Charter School



All five reasons that focus on the area of academics and curriculum received the highest average ratings of 2.8. In fact, over 85 percent of the parents considered the three highest-rated reasons, all of which involved the academic focus, as being “very important” in their decision. Lowest rated was the choice of the charter school as a substitute for a private school (average rating 1.5); 63 percent of the parents said this reason was “not important.” Similarly, a relatively high percentage of parents rated as “not important” school location (42 percent) and good facilities (23 percent) bringing the averages down to 1.7 and 2.0 respectively.

Meeting the Needs of a Special Needs Child

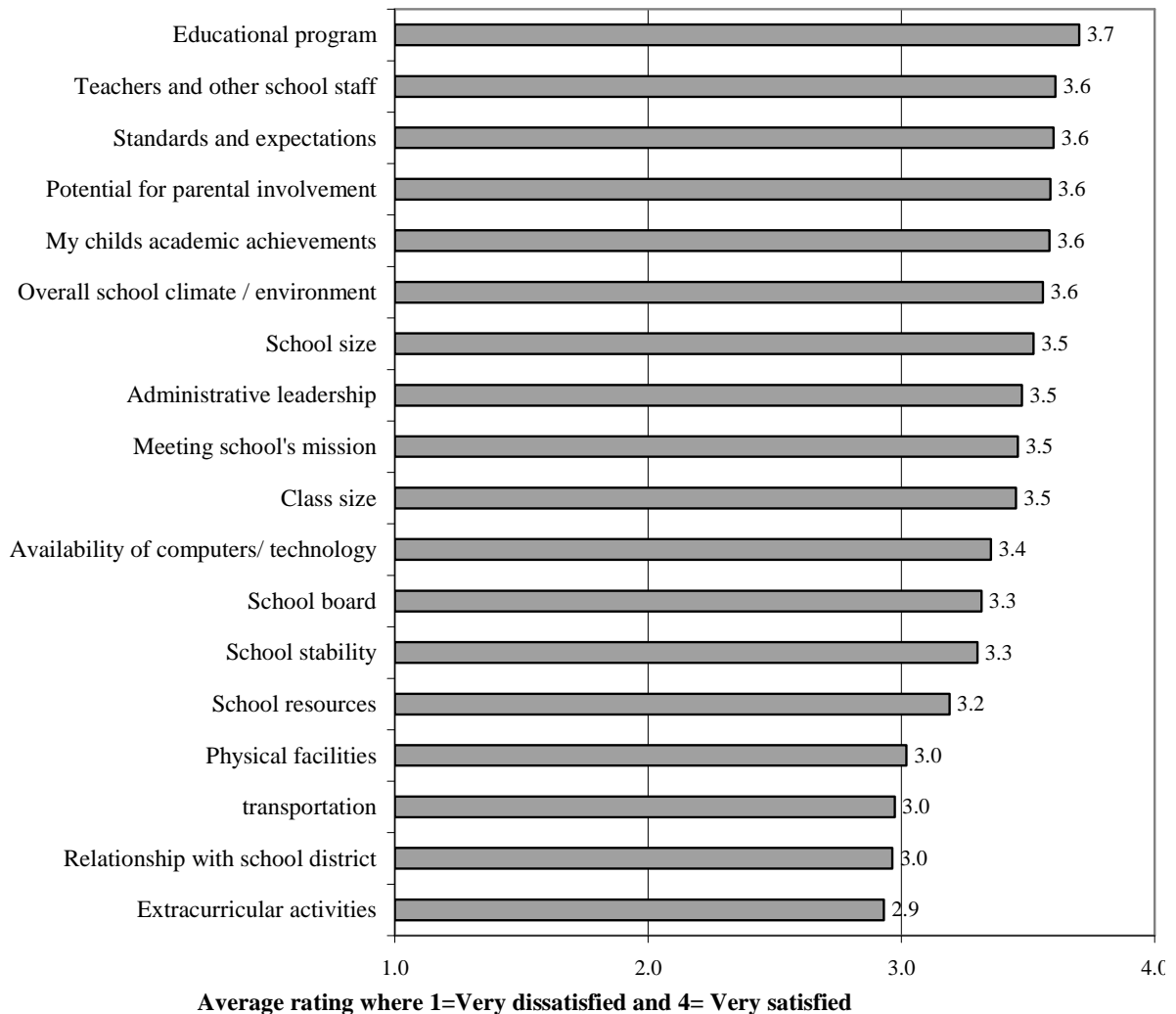
Parents were asked if the school was meeting the needs of their own special needs student. About 69 percent of the respondents stated that this did not apply (i.e., that their child is not a “special needs student”). Of the parents who have special needs children, 91 percent agreed that the school was meeting the needs of their children. Furthermore, for parents with special needs children, meeting these needs was rated a 2.5 on a 3-point scale as a major reason for sending their children to charter schools. It was rated as being “very important” by 66 percent of these parents.

Satisfaction with Charter School

Parents were asked to rate their satisfaction with various aspects of their charter school using a 4-point scale, where 1 = “very dissatisfied” and 4 = “very satisfied.” Figure 20 shows average ratings for each item.

Overall, parents were highly satisfied with their charter schools, rating all but one aspect of their school a 3.0 or higher. Parents were most satisfied with the educational program, school staff, and school standards (average ratings ranging from 3.6 to 3.7). They were highly satisfied with the potential for parental involvement (average rating 3.6). (Most parents are volunteers—69 percent—and only 3 percent were not involved in any role.) Parents were least satisfied with items that are related to the level of resources (3.2), specifically the physical facilities (3.0) and extracurricular activities (2.9). However, parents were happy with the availability of computers in charter schools (with an average rating of 3.4).

Figure 20. Satisfaction with Aspects of the Charter School

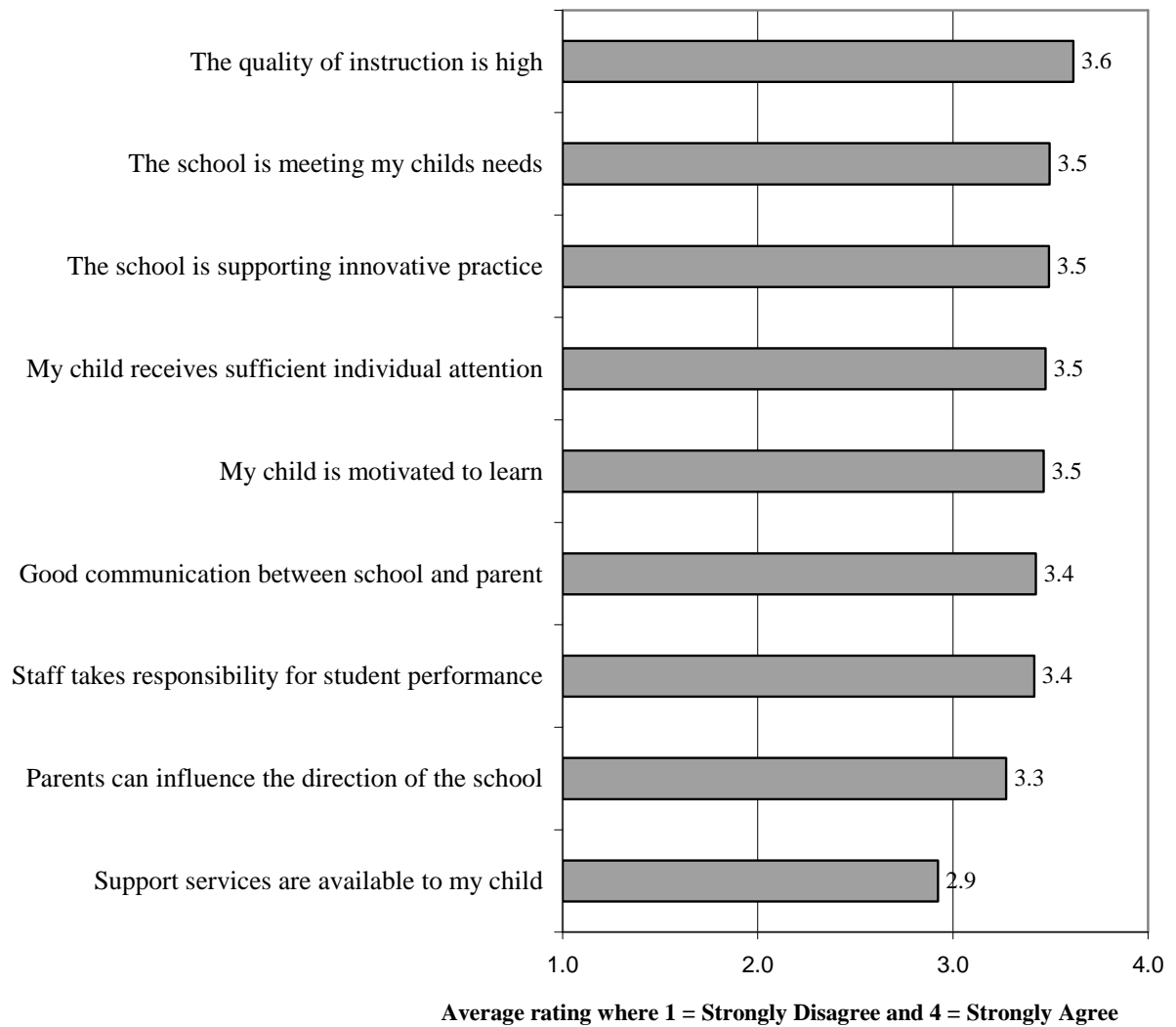


Meeting Children's Needs

Parents were presented with a number of statements about their charter school, many of which focused on the school's performance in meeting their children's needs. Parents were asked to rate their agreement using a 4-point scale, where 1 = "strongly disagree" and 4 = "strongly agree".

As Figure 21 illustrates, the responses are very positive, with average ratings ranging 3.4 and above for 7 of the 9 aspects. Parents strongly felt that the school is meeting their child's needs (average rating 3.5). Parents believed that the quality of instruction is high (average rating 3.6) and that their child is motivated to learn (average rating 3.5). The lowest rating was given to the school's ability to provide support services (2.9). (These findings are consistent with the parents concerns regarding school resources).

Figure 21. Rating the Performance of the Charter School



Finally, parents were asked to describe the greatest strengths and weaknesses of the charter school. The following list summarizes (in no particular order) the most frequently cited responses:

Greatest Strengths

- Educational program
- Staff
- Small size
- Relationship with parents
- Families
- Dress code
- Fewer social problems
- Student accountability
- Flexibility (in virtual schools)
- Ability for students to work at own pace

Greatest Weaknesses

- Facility
- Lowering expectations
- Leadership/Administration
- Teacher turnover
- Focus on test scores
- Lack of extracurricular activities
- Insufficient funding
- Communication with parents
- Distance from home to school
- Sponsoring district

SITE VISIT

NWREL evaluators visited each of the new charter schools founded in each year over the past five years. In May 2004, one NWREL staff member visited the three new charter schools: Meridian Medical Arts Charter School, North Star Public Charter School, and White Pine Charter School.

The purpose of these visits was to draw a picture of what makes these schools unique. It was also an opportunity for these new schools to share stories of their achievements as well as their challenges in running a charter school. The site visits generally consisted of classroom observations; focus groups with parents, teachers, and students; and a meeting with school administrators and the school board members. The following is a summary of the three school site visits conducted in May 2004.

Meridian Medical Arts Charter High School

Meridian Medical Arts Charter High School (MMACHS) is one of three charter schools in the Meridian Joint School District, which covers Meridian, Eagle, and part of Boise. Student enrollment in the district has grown 40 percent over the past 10 years and the district now has student enrollment of 26,420. MMACHS is located next to another charter school focused on technology. These two charter schools are housed separately in two similar new buildings owned by the district. MMACHS was built in 2003 with about 22,000 square feet and provides the food service for Meridian Charter High School students. The district purchased the land for these buildings about 10 years ago in anticipation of student population growth and future charter schools. The construction of Meridian Medical Arts building was funded by Meridian School District and some grant funding provided by the J. A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation. The building has a market value of \$2.4 million.

Both charter high schools in the district can be described as “district-initiated schools” with involvement of parents and other community members to write charters for schools of choice with an innovative curriculum focus. When the charter school law was passed in 1998, the district surveyed parents and community members as to what curriculum focus should be offered as part of the charter school, and the responses clearly pointed to technology and health-related careers. The former superintendent, Bob Haley, was instrumental in gathering information from the community for these two charter schools.

The principal is a former science teacher, school counselor, and served as an assistant principal for 16 years. He strongly believes that charter schools offer great options for students and parents to focus on career education. Currently working with him in the school are eight classroom teachers, three staff members, one custodian, one secretary and one school counselor. In 2003-04, 135 students, 60 for grade 10 and 75 for grade 9,

were enrolled in the school. Eight students were on individual educational plans for special education. About 70 percent of the students enrolled in the school are female. About 74 students were on the waiting list when the school opened.

Students who reside in the school district have first priority of enrollment. Other than that, no preference or priority enrollment is given to anyone. The school uses a lottery system that is administered by the school district. Names of the candidates are drawn at the Meridian School District office, and the school informs the district when the slots become available. Because of the open enrollment, students in the school are diverse in academic performance and ethnicity. Quite a few students in the school are children of newly arrived immigrants from other countries.

Even though the school enjoys a lot of autonomy and independence, a positive relationship exists between the charter school and the Meridian School District. The school district leases the new school building to the charter school. Two members of the Meridian School District Board of Trustees serve on the Charter Board of Directors and report the status of the charter school to the Meridian School District. The Meridian School District provides transportation for all charter school students. Students at the charter school can participate in various athletic and extracurricular activities through their home schools. Because two charter schools are next to each other, they share a lunch program at MMACHS. Some students from the technology charter school are doing their internship at the medical arts charter school by providing technical support for computers. Principals of both charter schools are exploring more opportunities for collaboration and have agreed to a chemistry class at MMACHS for Meridian Charter students.

The school provides a curriculum aligned with Idaho standards, while also providing unique opportunities for students to pursue job skills in high school. There are four health career pathways: direct patient care, ancillary care, rehabilitation, and emergency care. In addition to regular classroom teachers, some medical professionals are invited to teach in the classroom. Students will have the opportunity to explore careers, job shadow professionals, and participate in internships.

Interview with Teachers

The NWREL evaluator talked with a number of teachers during the site visit. One social study teacher shared his first year experience as follows:

I am a new teacher, and I view this charter school as an opportunity for me. In large schools, new teachers like me get kicked around a lot and easily get buried. Here I am able to do my own things and to be innovative in doing cutting-edge things. It is pretty easy to talk with other fellow teachers to team up for curriculum integration. I am constantly in contact with the curriculum

coordinator in the district. Our school is an educational lab, where we teach and learn at the same time.

Teachers interviewed feel that students in this charter school are not that different from those in other schools in the district. However, students here have higher expectations and a clear sense of the community and the identity of the school. One teacher stated:

Our district has a vision for this school. It is up to us to realize the vision of the school by developing a complete curriculum for the school. There are tons of work for us to do. I hope our school will be a blueprint for success.

The NWREL evaluator interviewed three other teachers during their lunch breaks. All are former teachers within the Meridian School District. One is a certified nurse and worked at St. Alphonsus Medical Center; one teacher was involved in the design of the school. Two of them will lose their tenure if they do not return to a school in the Meridian School District next year. At the time of the interview, both indicated that they would not return, and they were very confident that this school would succeed given its close ties to the district and what it can offer to students.

What we are trying to do here in this charter school is to teach our students academic basics plus a focus on a health-related field. It is a great place to try our new ideas. We are separate but connected to the school district.

Another teacher summed up her first-year experience:

The first year experience for me in this charter school is pretty positive, and the principal lets us make a lot decisions on our own. We have done many cross-curriculum projects, and we have a big voice in the school. Most parents wanted their kids to be in the school. The disciplinary problems are minimal. This is a place where you want to end your teaching career with great satisfaction.

Those teachers also admitted that the charter school is an option for students and teachers who have certain interests. It is not for everyone. Charter schools are limited in many areas compared with large schools.

Interview with Students (Four Students)

To get a sense of students' views of the new school, the NWREL evaluator interviewed four students. All were sophomores interested in a medical career. However, not all of them want to be doctors.

Students were positive about the new environment, and all of them enjoyed the small learning community of the school. They reported that teachers gave them a lot of

individual attention and were much more friendly compared to those in large schools they came from. Regarding the first experience, one student stated:

We feel we are all the same here for the similar purposes with some common interest. We are passionate about what we are doing here. We have a career and technology class where we get our career information. I found great relevance in our learning here. For example, in our English class we read books related to medicine, and we did the same thing for biology. However, I miss having lunch with our sports teammates and a lot of choices available in larger schools.

Once a month, students “dress up for success,” which they feel is a great experience for them. These students are proud that other students in the district view their school as a “smart school,” better equipped with wireless Internet connections. The school has many laptops for students to use at the school. Because the school does not have a physical library, the Internet access is considered very important for research.

Currently, the school curriculum offers career and technology, economics, English, foreign language, government, health occupation, health and wellness, history, math, science, psychology, strategic study skills, and speech.

Interview with the School Counselor

The counselor had served as a counselor for many years before he joined this school. He stated that the reason he came to the school was that he believes in the school’s philosophy of bringing relevance to student learning in the school. In his words, “It is a school where all kids concentrate in one area, and we help them tie everything together.”

Because of the small size of the school, he feels that his role goes beyond that of a counselor, that he is more of an assistant principal. He is responsible for registration and spends a significant amount of his time tracking the academic performance of each student and identifying those with certain issues. He then communicates these issues to their respective teachers. Like counselors in other schools, he deals with such student concerns as insecurity, family issues, abuse, and so on. However, a school counselor is usually responsible for about 500 students, and he is responsible for less than half that number. He commented:

Meridian is a most innovative school district. Our school is a good example. Here I have time and energy to pay close attention to my students and provide needed help. Initially, I thought this school would only attract the brightest students in our school district, but later I found our lottery system of enrollment has brought a variety of students coming to our school. We have a lot of doers who will fulfill their dream here.

North Star Public Charter School

Clearly posted at the entrance of North Star Public Charter School is the school mission:

“Developing Virtuous Citizen Leaders”

North Star Public Charter School was approved by Meridian Joint School District in April 2002, and began operation in September 2003, becoming the third charter school in the district. North Star is housed in a new building with about 14,400 square feet. A group of parents, several of whom have expertise in real estate, put together a financial plan and obtained financing through a local bank for the construction of the school. The contractor—and parent of one of the students—gave a significant discount of the construction fee as his contribution to the school. Construction was completed in about three months with the help of many volunteering parents. Most of the students come from Treasure Valley. In 2003-04, 263 K-8 students were enrolled with 13 teachers (32 staff members in total).

Currently the school does not provide transportation for students but provides a carpool list for parents who wish to participate. After school, students gather in front of the school where the school principal calls individual students when their ride arrives. She knows the names of almost all the students, and some kids hug her and say good-bye as they walk by.

The principal, who got her master’s degree in education from the University of Idaho, was previously a secondary school administrator, taught music in kindergarten through 12th grade, and has taught reading, speech, and humanities at the high-school level. Before coming to North Star, she served as director of academics for Idaho Virtual Academy. When asked what motivated her to come to North Star, she responded:

It is exciting to be in on the start up of a school, completely new with a group of brand new staff members and brand new families. We have chosen the Harbor Method as our model because the management plan is “tried and true”, and the curriculum is data driven, rigorous, and aligned from kindergarten through 8th grade.

She made a point of putting “public” in the name of her school. She told the NWREL evaluator that it is important for the community to know a charter school is still a public school.

Curriculum

North Star Charter School is fashioned after Liberty Charter School, the original Harbor School and model. The Harbor School method is centered on founder Becky Stallcop's belief that:

When students are given a learning environment with low threat to their personal safety and self esteem and highly challenging academic content, the inevitable outcome is accelerated learning.

The name Harbor School Method comes from total commitment to make schools a "safe harbor" for the children.

In alignment with Idaho state standards, the North Star offers:

Language arts using the Spalding Method for teaching phonics, spelling, reading, and writing; the Six Traits method for writing; and the Shurley Method for grammar.

Science with emphasis on hands-on experimentation and functional knowledge of scientific methods.

Mathematics as a tool for reasoning and problem solving in a purposeful way (Saxon Math is used for homework).

Music training, including basic keyboarding skills for kindergarten through grade 3, choir, string instruments, and after-school music activities.

Social studies emphasizing the understanding and application of the knowledge, concepts, principles, and themes embedded in each of the social studies: history, geography, political science, and economics.

Technology to support a child's natural way of learning through individual and group discovery and seeking solutions to real-life challenges.

Spanish and Physical Education as a part of the week for each child (at this time P.E. is offered on the playground or in the classroom. There is no gym yet in the school).

A variety of tests required by the State are used in the school to assess progress and to identify areas in need of improvement. These tests include the Idaho Reading Indicator (IRI) for kindergarten through 3rd grade, the Idaho Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) for grades 2 through 8, the Direct Mathematics Assessment (DMA) for 4th, 6th, and 8th grades, and the Direct Writing Assessment (DWA) for 5th graders.

The school now has a curriculum that is well articulated and aligned from K to 8. Teachers meet Friday afternoons for collaboration while students are released to go home at noon. To make up for the time used for this purpose, each school day at North Star is 15 minutes longer than the regular schedule.

Interview with Parents

The NWREL evaluator interviewed three parents, and all of them were involved in founding this charter school. When asked why a charter school is needed here, one parent responded:

In the city of Star, we don't have many choices as for what kind of schools we want to send our kids to. Our regular schools have become increasingly crowded. This was when the idea of a neighborhood school started to brew. The charter school is a great opportunity we all wanted to jump on.

Through word of mouth, the concept of the charter school was echoed by many parents who have school-age children. The support by parents at the school is enormous, and Hidden Spring Charter School, a charter school in the Boise school district provides a concrete model for parents to understand what a charter school looks like.

In discussing the benefits of attending the North Star, parents listed the following:

Size of the school. The school is relatively small, and parents want the school to remain small even though 550 students are on the waiting list⁵. Because of the small size, parents feel individualized instruction is possible.

Discipline. To provide a safe environment for student learning is part of the mission of the school. Therefore, student discipline is strictly enforced in the school, which includes dress code, attendance, and acceptable language. Weekly newsletters are sent to parents to keep them posted on what is going on in the school.

Ownership. Because many parents were involved in founding the school, they have a strong sense of ownership. In 2003-04 about 140 families volunteered in the school, and each day 30 to 40 parents were doing various volunteer work in the school. The school was able to raise from parents \$5,000 within two weeks for part of the school construction.

Curriculum. Parents feel that curriculum in the school is contextual and relevant. It is more of an open-ended curriculum that has room for students to take challenges.

⁵ There is a ranking of priority in student enrollment: 1. children of founding parents, 2. students with siblings in the school, 3. students from Meridian School District, and 4. students from other places.

Interview with Gale Pooley

Gale Pooley is the chairman of the school board for North Star. He is considered by many parents as the founder of the school. He had been instrumental in putting together the petition for the charter school and the financial plan for building the new school. He got his Ph.D. in economics from the University of Idaho and taught at Albertson College. He is currently a commercial real-estate appraiser.

Using economic terms, he felt equity, ownership, and a return for parents are essential factors for the success of the school. He told the NWREL evaluator that “With this school, parents have a lot of say in school decisions, and parents contribute to the school in different forms and add value to the school. Here we bring ideas to school and get it implemented right away.”

He cited that student achievement in North Star is 20 percent higher than the Idaho state average, while the costs of running the school are 20 percent lower than the state average. He strongly believes that North Star is a good example of how to set up a charter school with a strong culture, a firm financial plan, a good working relationship with the authorizing school district, and high standards for student achievement.

He also stated that North Star is not for every student. He feels it is only good for students who choose to attend and parents who choose to make the commitment to the school.

He also recognizes that setting up a school and operating a school could require different skills. He is pretty open-minded towards how to sustain parents’ enthusiasm and models of successful schools in the long run.

Interview with Students and Teachers

The NWREL evaluator interviewed five students, three of whom have siblings in the school. They all enjoy the personal attention they receive from their teachers and that class participation is encouraged in every classroom at every level. They appreciate learning math all year round instead of section by section. They stated that there are many rules in the school. Dress code is one of them. When asked what they want to change in the school in the near future, they said allowing them to wear jeans and to participate in after-school sports.

All three teachers interviewed reported that some of students previously had issues at regular schools and a good portion of their students used to be home schooled. They all agreed it is important for their school to remain connected with the school district. Instead of taking resources from the district, they believe that they are carrying the “burden” of the school district to meet the needs of those students. They are fully aware they are not offering everything that a large school could offer.

White Pine Charter School

It is fair to say that the beginning of White Pine Charter School was rather bumpy. The application for the new charter school was denied twice by the sponsoring Bonneville School District before getting approval in July 2002. According to Anita, one of the school board members, the main reason for the denial of their application was the busing of students. The relationship between the sponsoring school district and White Pine is still young and developing. The school district was offered a position on the governing board but declined because of “conflicts of interest.” The school district is described by charter board members as generally supportive when asked, but tends to limit its involvement.

Anita, a professional CPA, was instrumental in putting together the application, although she considers herself an “editor and publisher” of parents’ ideas. She serves as treasurer of the charter board and her husband, Dan, is the chair of the board. Anita volunteers a significant amount of time managing the school’s finances and business. Dan and Anita have one child who attended a charter school before they moved to Idaho Falls in 1999. At that time there were no charter schools in Idaho Falls, and their ideas of forming a new charter school were soon shared and supported by many other parents in the area.

With a special land-use permit, White Pine Charter School is currently located in a residential area. White Pine Charter School currently leases temporary buildings placed at this site. The new school is planned to be built at the current school site. In 2003-04, the school enrolled a total of 195 students in kindergarten through 6th grade. Initial enrollment was completed through a lottery held in April 2003. Advertisement for enrollment was in English and Spanish through multiple media sources. Upon completion of the lottery, according to the charter, preference was given first to students from the sponsoring school district. Parents are responsible for student transportation. The neighboring Tie Breaker Elementary provides lunch for students of White Pine and also provides services to special education students on contractual basis.

Dr. Jewel Hoopes served as the school principal in 2003-04. She was approached by the charter board in the summer of 2003 for the administrator position. She was a former school principal and assistant superintendent and worked for the Idaho State Department of Education. In March, the charter board members reached a decision not to offer her a contract in the coming year for apparent incongruence between school board expectations of her and what she would like to do in the school. Some parents interviewed during the site visit expressed mixed feelings regarding the decision without knowing details of the school operation, but they were trusting board members to make this decision for the benefit of the school.

The principal’s position was advertised through the district web site. Peggy Sharp was selected in June to head the school in the coming school year. Peggy was a teacher/princi-

pal at Osgood Elementary School in Idaho Falls District #91. She taught 2nd and 6th grades for 17 years and was principal for the last four years. She has a master's degree in instruction and curriculum and holds an administrative endorsement from Idaho State University. She has been in education for 26 years. Even though she is still new to White Pine, she has been amazed at the commitment and work ethic of the parents involved in this school.

Curriculum

The curriculum framework at White Pine Charter School is largely modeled after Colorado-based Parker Core Knowledge Charter School, whose curriculum is based on the Core Knowledge Series of books edited by E. D. Hirsh, Jr. At White Pine, the skills and content of Core Knowledge (what K-8 students need to know) were reported to provide approximately 50 percent of the total skills and content taught at White Pine. Many of these skills are integrated into the specific curriculum materials such as Open Court Reading K-3, novel-based reading 4-6, Everyday Mathematics K-6, and Shurley Grammar 1-6.

Due to the limits of the school budget, two parents volunteered their time to teach music using a curriculum selected by a professor from Boise State University.

Interviews with Parents

The NWREL evaluator interviewed four parents of children in the school. All of them appreciated the choice that the charter school has offered them. One parent told the evaluator that her son has anxiety problems in a large school, and the school counselor recommended a private school they could not afford, so the charter school became a great alternative. The parent has another son who is also at White Pine attending kindergarten from 8:15 a.m. to 3:15 p.m. This extended period of time at kindergarten means a great deal to her family.

Another parent, with four children in the school, enjoyed what the school could offer at this time. However, she felt that there is a lack of clear policies regarding the evaluation of teachers and the school principal. She also feels there should be a fine line between parental involvement and interfering with classroom teaching. She feels parents and board members need to respect the professionalism of the teachers hired in this school. She cited incidents of one school board member going into the classrooms without permission of teachers.

Interview with Teachers

The first years in this new charter school were, for those teachers interviewed, a mixed experience. On one hand, they enjoyed the challenge of starting a new school and the

flexibility in teaching. Because of the small size, the teachers found they had more time to give students individual attention and to collaborate with other teachers in the school. Because of active parent involvement in the school, all three reported they had much better communication with parents. Parents are expected to volunteer 20 hours each school year. On the other hand, they believe that “Core Knowledge” and “Idaho Standards” are just a curriculum framework and that they need to develop a specific curriculum to meet students’ needs. They felt there is a lack of leadership in facilitating the process and that communication between teachers and administration is inadequate. Some teachers reported they were left out of the communication loop on such highly relevant issues as school days and their salaries.

Currently, because of the space limitations, the school’s 12 computers are located in a single room, which is also where the principal’s cubicle is located. There are no computers available for teachers to use in their classrooms. This negatively affects many things that teachers could do with their students in the classroom. However, all teachers have access to Internet.

CONCLUSIONS

Over the past five years, Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory evaluators have collected a significant amount of data from Idaho charter schools through self-reported school profiles, stakeholder surveys, and site visits as part of a contract with Idaho Department of Education. Although most of the data collected are self-reported and descriptive in nature, analysis of the data provides a clear picture of the current status of Idaho charter schools and their successes and challenges.

The conclusions of this report are based on the data collected over the past five years and organized around three guiding questions for this study:

1. Did the charter schools accomplish what they proposed, based on their mission and goals? (Accountability)
2. Did their students meet the achievement levels proposed in their charter school applications? (Student Performance)
3. What makes a charter school in Idaho unique? (Uniqueness)

Accountability

The number of charters approved in Idaho increased from eight in 1999-2000 to 19 in 2003-04, and, during this same period of time, the number of students enrolled increased from 935 to 4,796. Out of 19 approved charter schools, one never opened and two had their charters revoked. The data in 2003-04 for the remaining charter schools show that 89 percent of organizational goals established in the petitions approved by the sponsoring districts were met (50 percent) or exceeded (39 percent); 9 percent of these goals were partially met; and only 2 percent of these goals were not yet addressed.

Student Performance

The 2003-04 data (self-reported) show that 83 percent of student performance goals were met (68 percent) or exceeded (15 percent), and 17 percent of the goals were partially met. All charter schools used multiple tools to assess their student academic performances in compliance with statewide assessment requirements.

Uniqueness

Idaho is one of few states that have amended their charter school laws to include virtual learning as an option for delivery of instruction. In 2003-04, approximately 43 percent of 4,796 Idaho charter school students were served by two virtual schools (Idaho Virtual

Academy and Idaho Virtual High School) online. Character education and hands-on experiences are part of the curriculum for most charter schools in this study.

As a school option, charter schools in Idaho have support from the communities they directly serve. Parental involvement is common in charter schools and, in fact, is expected by these charter schools as part of their operation to the extent the parents were actually doing the voluntary teaching. Teachers in charter schools have a high level of commitment, and they frequently mention joining charter school faculties to have a choice to explore new educational ideas. Students surveyed were positive about their experience in charter schools for the individual attention they could get from their teachers and for timely feedback for their academic performance.

As Idaho charter schools are on their way to maturity, they face a series of challenges:

Facility

About 50 percent of charter schools in Idaho are operating in temporary facilities. It is still an uphill struggle for these schools to find themselves eventually in permanent facilities. Some temporary facilities are crowded and limiting to student learning activities.

Public Image

Some charter schools still have difficulty defining who they are and how they are different from their district schools. There is still lack of understanding in the community that charter schools are public schools.

Relationship with Sponsoring School District

Even though charter schools were designed to be autonomous in many respects, the relationship with or the support they could get from their sponsoring school districts could be crucial on a number of fronts, such as facility, lunch program, transportation, and purchasing. More discussions are needed at different levels regarding district roles in supporting charter schools and the ways in which charter schools could involve their district effectively in operating their schools.

School Leadership and Governance

There is a strong need for technical assistance for these charter schools in their leadership and governance in handling such issues as budgeting, personnel policies, and community relationships.

Sustaining Parental Involvement

For most charter schools in Idaho, founding parents were instrumental in setting up their charter schools. These schools have thrived on their enthusiasm and dedication. As children of these founding parents leave charter schools, it will be a challenge to sustain that level of enthusiasm and dedication, particularly when the success of the school is dependent upon them. Some schools may also shift their focus over time as ideas and needs change within communities.